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Sevens

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Prologue

Clad in robes, seven, me included, were passing through the gates of Centralle.

I, 【Lyle Walt】, was observing the surroundings from the center of that group.

Around, there were travelers and merchants and adventurers lined up, set for the capital, and among them, there was even a troupe of performers.

The cold had become even more severe, and looking up, the clouded sky seemed as if it could pour out snow at any moment.

I gazed up high, and thought over the reason we had separated from the group and gone ahead to the Imperial Capital.

"… Infiltrate the Capital first, and spread rumor of the expeditionary corps. How frightfully brilliant if I do say so myself."

Nearby, the red-haired Aria had her violet eyes clouded over as she held both hands to her ears.

Recently she'd been polishing her manly side, but when you look at her like this, she sure is cute.

"What's wrong, dear Aria? If your ears are cold, I'll lend you my hands."

"… He's a stranger… the current Lyle's a stranger… given the time, he'll become the comrade we know and love again…"

She gave a muffled reply in a low voice, and I think her bashfulness was simply adorable.

There, the pale verdant haired Miranda-san was staring at the ground with eyes that had lost their highlights.

“Oh, you don’t seem in the best of moods either, Miranda-san.”

When I said that, Miranda-san issued a voice as if she was forcefully wringing it out.

“L-Lyle… please take off the -san. Also don’t talk so much. I don’t want to remember it right now. I’m begging you…”

Hearing that, I…

“I got it, Miranda! Oh? I get the feeling the distance between our hearts just shrunk by that much! Also… if you want to be a bird flying free in the skies, then I’ll be your… no! I’ll become all of your roosts!”

Just a little while back, both Aria and Miranda had stated their desire to become birds.

And Miranda of wanting me to be her cage, I believe.

As I said that, Miranda’s face turned bright red, and she made a complicated expression.

Aria crouched down on the spot.

“I’m happy you know. I’m happy, but… I’m begging you, right now… now alone is…”

“What’s wrong, your face is bright red, you know? Haha, let me guess… You’ve fallen for me, haven’t you.”

『Bfffffff!!』

The blue Jewel hanging at my neck was bestowed with silver craftsmanship of rare metal.

The voice that came from it was that of the Sixth Generation Head, 【Fiennes Walt】.

From a glance, he looked quite rebellious, but in truth, he couldn’t raise his head to the Fifth Generation Head.

The Sixth's time period was a dark age of Bahnseim history, and the Capital was rotten with bribery left and right.

For that sake, the man had no choice but to stick his hands in various things.

Like that, he had a dark image stuck onto him, and the Sixth was later evaluated as the greatest scoundrel of the Walt House.

In all actuality, he inherited the foundation the fifth had built, challenged surrounding territories, attained victory, and greatly expanded the House's land.

He did dabble in quite a bit, given the times, but it's also fact that he wouldn't have survived if he hadn't.

That Sixth contained a laugh, and holding their stomachs, the other ancestors also burst out.

The Third.

『Already three candidates lined up! Frighteningly brilliant, becoming a roost. Ah, and falling for you!』

The Fourth was also laughing.

『Best Lyllllee! It looks like we'll have quite a harvest this time.』

The Fifth.

『… Lyle, you haven't learned a single thing from last time.』

That's what he says, but all I've done is speak the truth. There's no helping it.

I flipped my hair, and looked at Monica carrying a loading tray.

On it was the form of the Gryphon in its coffin of ice.

We were purposely showing it off, and those around were brimming with curiosity.

Easily carrying such heavy-looking luggage, she had leisurely draped a loose robe over her maid uniform, and looked at me with a grin.

“What’s up? Making such a happy face?”

When I said that, Monica…

“There’s no way I could go without a smile. The chicken dickhead I awoke to has finally returned! Back then, you said you would fly through the sky, but for it to be through physical means was something even I didn’t anticipate. I was sure you meant to make it bigger in the world.”

When I went up against the Gryphon, I rode on its back, and soared through the sky.

It was quite a thrilling and enjoyable experience, I believe.

“Don’t praise me so. It’s fine if you want to promote me to flying chicken dickhead, though.”

“Too long, rejected. Chicken dickhead it is.”

Seeing her acting joyously bashful, I felt surrounding eyes collect on us.

Well well well, I thought, as I waited for the gatekeeper to issue us permission to pass.

Even more apologetic than usual, Clara held up her large staff. Her ruffled deep-blue hair hung over her face.

From within the gaps in it, her red eyes were watching me.

“Something the matter?”

“… I do want to apologize for my behavior the other day, but at the moment, I really don’t want to get involved.”

Seeing such a complex Clara, I shot her a smile. Yeah, it's okay to feel sad sometimes.

She pulled her hood down lower, as if trying to run from my field of vision.

Nearby, Miranda's pale violet-haired sister Shannon looked at me with pitiful eyes.

"You really are the worst case."

"What, are you at that age where you come to tease the boy you like? Unfortunately, if you want to catch my eye, you'll have to build up a few more years first."

"… No, we're only two apart, aren't we? Are you an idiot?"

"And how should I shut the mouth saying such things."

When I brought my face closer, she hurriedly covered her mouth with her hands.

I lightly flicked her forehead with my finger, and spoke with a smile.

"'Tis but a joke. I'll put that on hold until you're a bonifide lady. Become a splendid one, you hear."

The Seventh let out his voice from the Jewel.

『This time's missing that explosive something. Even when he's creating happenings left and right…』

He seemed truly mortified, but I'm not a man who'll keep on adding to a past I want to forget.

Shannon spoke.

"… Novem, I think this man's lost it."

“Saying it with your face so red… I see! You’re hiding your embarrassment. You sure are cute, Shannon.”

With her long brown hair tied into a single side ponytail, and violet eyes, Novem looked at me and spoke.

“Lyle-sama, let’s book an inn at once. Any more of this may truly become dangerous.”

She truly did seem worried, and thinking that I may be the only one out there to make her this concerned, I felt a little blessed.

“Yeah, if you say so, we’ll find an inn somewhere or another… a twin room is fine as well.”

“No, let’s keep it at personal rooms. I’m sure that would be for the best.”

While marveling over the cuteness of Novem’s embarrassed face, it finally came our turn to pass.

She spoke.

“Now any more is dangerous, so let’s quickly proceed to the inn.”

While watching Novem frantically give out orders, I finally passed under the gate of Centralle.

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Noon had passed when we arrived at the inn, and in order to carry out our plan, I tried to go out again.

But Novem and the others stopped me.

In the end, the only ones to remain in the inn were me, Monica, and

Shannon.

We had separate rooms prepared, and the inn was one where each had a shower and toilet equipped.

The first floor was built as a dining hall. It was quite a standard establishment in Centralle, and thinking back to the start of my journey, it was a class of inn I could only now stay at without giving too much mind to the cost.

“Quite moving a sentiment. I’ve really been through a lot since then.”

Driven from the Walt House I called home, I became an adventurer with my former fiancée Novem.

Not knowing left from right, I listened in to the ancestors words, and used their Skills, relying on the Jewel.

In the city of Dalien, I had an encounter with Aria, and after moving to the City of Scholars, I met Miranda, Shannon, Monica and Clara.

I can’t say our recruiting went all too favorable, but I can definitely sense a bond with my current comrades.

“… Even when I already have Novem… how sinful a man…”

When I said that, looking into the mirror in the room, the Fourth agreed.

『Exactly. How about considering your current situation for a moment? You’ll get a knife to the back at this rate. Well, Novem’s there, so it’ll probably turn out alright.』

“Jealousy? On the contrary, I’m actually quite comfortable here.”

When I said that, the third interjected.

『mr. lyle best Lyle.』

Hearing him, I became a little embarrassed from his praise.

“Even if you praise me so, I’ve nothing to return.”

There, I heard a knock at the door.

With a tray in hand, Shannon entered accompanied by Monica.

“Lyle, it’s time for lunch. It would be a pain for us all if you went and caused some problems outside, so we took the liberty of purchasing sandwiches at the dining hall.”

On a small and circular table in the room, she lined up two portions of food.

As an automaton of ancient make, Monica was able to live on even without eating.

Of course, she had a line built connecting her to me, and she arbitrarily lived on my Mana.

It was as if we were connected by the string of fate.

Shannon took her seat, and began munching on her sandwich.

“It’s dry and tasteless.”

While she blatantly expressing such impressions, Monica offered me some seasonings.

“Chicken dick, here I have mayonnaise, ketchup and mustard. Use it as you will.”

Shannon stared at her.

“… Why is it Lyle. Normally, wouldn’t you be offering it to me!?”

Shannon shouted out quite angrily, but Monica was smiling.

“Oh how late you are to the table, little girl! My number one is this chicken dickhead, regardless of how pitiful a state he’s in. You get it? It’s

because there's love. Love!"

"An automaton… well, so be it. Lyle, I'll be borrowing this."

Saying that, Shannon spread several layers of mayonnaise in the gap between the breads.

Of the seasonings Monica produced, a large majority were exceedingly tasty.

They were ancient flavors I doubt you'd ever find in stores.

It appears she knew the recipes, so she made them in advance.

"Oy, girly! That's the prized possession of that Chicken!"

Shannon ignored it, and stuffed her cheeks with the sandwich, and continued on with her meal.

That's how the girl acted now, but none too long ago, she was a woman who played the part of an unseeing maiden.

She was reformed through Miranda, and now served as our comrade.

According to the ancestors in the Jewel, she had Demon Eyes, or something like that.

(If I had eyes like hers…)

I was just a little jealous.

When I brought my sandwich to my own mouth, I found it truly was quite dry.

"It really is tasteless. If it's like this, than Novem's or Monica's cooking would be leagues ahead."

When I said that, Monica delightedly lifted the ends of her golden twin tails as she…

“Naturally! I loathe being compared to that damn vixen, but my love is stuffed full of love, I tell you. Having been made custom to your tongue, it’ll never fall short of any of the rabble…”

After she said that much, I spoke.

“Thanks for everything, Monica… I really do like your cooking. Tonight, I’d like to eat something you’ve made for once. It’s been quite a while.”

Monica stiffened for a moment, before turning to me with creaking movements.

“S-s-s-s-s-so you mean..! You mean you wish to eat my cooking? You’re saying you wish to eat up my love!? Of course I’ll do it. I’ll pack in enough love to make it lethal!!”

With a smile, I…

“Yeah… with an extra-large serving of love, please.”

As I said that, she promptly exited the room.

“I’ll make the preparations right away! Calculate the required time, and assemble the ingredients… in that case why not use up all my secret stash to make the supreme..!!”

The loud voice she let out as she ran away was surely audible from outside the inn.

Shannon gnommed her first sandwich to its end, and began spreading ketchup over the second one.

I spoke.

“Hmm, she sure is a cute one.”

And from within the Jewel, the Seventh…

『… And that’s all she wrote. With an extra-large serving of love. Is

that really all we'll get this time around?』

And on his query, the Sixth…

『Not yet! There's still time. The Walt House's Wonder Child has yet to show his mettle!』

The Fourth was…

『I think, 'Jealousy? On the contrary, I'm quite comfortable,' wasn't bad!』

The Third spoke.

『We must be patient, men! This atmosphere… right now, it's just mr. lyle and Shannon-chan alone! It will come. Hope will definitely arrive!』

I'm sorry for those overly-exited ancestors of mine, but this is already the third time for me. There's no way I'd make the same mistakes thrice.

(Sorry, but I can't live up to your expectations.)

Shannon was looking over at my sandwich.

I had used the mustard on mine, so perhaps that made her curious.

"Want it?"

"I-I don't need it!"

Even while saying that, she continued taking fleeting glances, so I brought the consumable over to her mouth.

There, her small mouth opened, and clamped down into the bread.

Mustard flowed out onto the area around her lips.

"Ah, this one isn't bad either."

“So in the end, you still went and ate it. Not that I really mind.”

When I moved to wipe off her mouth, she tossed the remains of the sandwich into her mouth.

“Ah~ I’m stuffed. Can’t eat another bite.”

And to the girl saying such things, I…

“While I’ve barely had any. I guess I’ll save my appetite for tonight… ah.”

“… What is it?”

She rested her chin on the table, and I spoke.

“No, I was just wonder how long it’d take until you’d be ripe for the picking. At present, it feels like a distant future.”

Saying that, I shook my head. Shannon rose from her seat, and took some distance from me.

From the Jewel, the Fifth…

『… Ripe for the picking? Isn’t that enough?』

The Seventh was…

『Extra servings of love. I won’t give up that one yet!』

The Fifth casually joined in.

(Good grief, just what are these people doing?)

Pondering over my ancestors, I continued to play along with Shannon’s retreat.

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… On the main road.

The group proceeding down it was centered around an extravagant carriage, with knights and soldiers marching in file by its side.

Judging from their equipment and the quality of the men, they had received considerable training, and to avoid any involvement with them, the other parties on the road would preemptively move themselves out of the way.

Surmising they would attain safe travels free of charge if they followed such a carriage, a flock of travelers and adventurer, as well as merchants were following while maintaining a fixed distance from it.

Seeing that, 【Maizel Walt】 seemed quite amused.

“Hah! Because the safety of these roads is so bad, the amount of groups following us like that simply keeps increasing. We’re raising our speed to shake them off.”

In regards to the ill-humored father, the mother 【Claire】 voiced her agreement.

“When our precious Celes is in such a hurry to get to Centralle, for them to slow us like this! How could it be… such a thing would be unthinkable in the Walt House’s territory!”

The one to sooth such a sullen couple was a lovely young lady.

An elegant air drifted about her, and even when her age was still immature, every one of her gestures held a sort of captivating charm.

Her blond hair was tidy, and its long waves let off a fine luster.

Atop her white dress, she draped a white pelt coat, and the smile on her face held true innocence.

“Father, mother.”

“What is it, Celes?”

As her parents seemed to find satisfaction in the smile directed at them, Celes spoke.

“I am terribly bored.”

Her mother, Claire, began to panic.

“What shall we do? We’ve no new toy to give you… what game do you want to play, Celes?”

Hearing that, Celes looked at the groups trailing behind the carriage.

“I want to see the forms of our knights and soldiers saving the people in fear of monsters.”

When she said that, Maizel smiled.

“I see. As expected a daughter of the Walt House. But if there are no monsters to be found…”

To his troubled expression, Celes spoke.

“… Is it truly no good? Are the knights and soldiers of the Walt House really so unreliable?”

On her voice that seemed to simply invite in spoiling, Claire glared at Maizel.

“Dear! Do you not feel sorry for Celes!? Can the Walt House’s knights not grant a request as simple as this!?”

“I-I apologize. It’s a request of our dear daughter. I’ll make the preparations at once.”

Maizel called out to a mounted knight near the carriage.

When he opened the vehicle's window, the knight approached.

"What is the matter, Maizel-sama?"

"… I get the feeling the group behind us will be attacked by monsters. Celes says she wishes to witness the gallantry of the knights. You understand my intent?"

Hearing that, the knight…

"… It will be prepared at once! Alfred!"

With his long silky black hair swaying, another mounted youth approached.

"Present!"

What hung at his waist was a sabre, and the manerisms of the young male knight felt quite refined.

【Alfred Virden】 was his name.

In swordsmanship, he was Lyle's senior apprentice, and a man of a clan serviced to the Walt House from its early days.

The knight issued the youth some orders.

"There's a possibility that monsters may assail the group behind. You are to remain vigilant of our surroundings… Celes-sama wishes to see our service. Go find a big one!"

"Leave it to me!"

Saying that, Alfred urged on his horse, and promptly separated from the group.

Find a monster, and set it on the group behind.

… That was Maizel's order.

Seeing Alfred disappear in the distance, Celes smiled in satisfaction.

“Good grief, you sure are a troublesome girl.”

Hearing that, Claire smiled.

“But it’s all for our precious child isn’t it? Admiring the tales of gallant knights is something all girls are to go through once in their lives. But if they perform well, we’ll have to bestow a reward you know, Celes.”

Claire told Celes they’d have to grant a reward to the knights.

After digging through the things stuffed into the carriage, the girl produced a single dagger.

It didn’t look all too expensive, but it was a dagger made of Rare Metal, and bestowed with a Skill.

A perfect article for such a task.

“Then let it be so!”

Maizel spoke.

“Oh they’d be delighted with such a dagger. As I thought, you really do understand a knight’s heart, Celes. But just where did you acquire such an item? I’m sure we assembled much more high-class equipment for you…”

Claire tilted her head.

“That’s right. It really isn’t fitting of one like you, Celes.”

Celes was…

“… Who knows? But if it’s in my possession, then it must belong to me.”

She gave an innocent smile.

Chapter 1: Fraud

In a room we borrowed at the inn, I was sipping a cup of tea.

Monica had borrowed the dining hall to make preparations for the evening, and I was enjoying the taste of the first tea Novem had brewed in quite a while as I dealt with our guest.

With some light snacks atop a table between us, the one I faced was quite a pretty penny.

An elf as well as a singer, the girl's name was 【Eva】.

Her pale pink hair was long and wavy, while the color of her eyes was of the same shade.

Her white skin was also a spectacle, but more so than anything were her ears, much longer than that of a human's.

(A moment of elegance… how fitting of me.)

When fighting the Gryphon, there hadn't been the time to take it easy, so I'm delighted the time has come where we can enjoy our time in leisure.

However…

"Lyle-sama, it's good and all to enjoy your tea, but if you don't move the conversation forward…"

"Oh, right. My apologies."

I offered my apologies to the one across from me.

While her height was quite high, the girl before my eyes claimed to be a novice singer of only sixteen.

"I don't mind. Now then, I've a grasp of the story where a former noble son took part in the subjugation of a Hippogryph, but why is there a

need to tack lies onto that? The Gryphon-slaying expeditionary force that's become the topic of rumor… that does sound like a tasty story to latch onto, but personally, I'm more interested in you."

That this girl, Eva, held interest in me… I understood it.

Novem looked at me with worry.

Aria was busy covering up her ears.

Miranda was casting her eyes to the ground.

Clara was fidgeting.

And behind her sister, Shannon was remaining vigilant of me.

Such bliss. To be surrounded by beauties.

"Well, there's this and that going on. Is it not strange for a singer to directly ask for such a tale?"

We'll have Eva sing the songs of the expeditionary force. By doing that, we'll be able to spread the rumors of their deeds through the capital.

"You've already shown me the Gryphon's body and answered my questions. But you see, I'm 【Eva of Nihil】. There's no one my better in the clan when it comes to song, and I want to be more knowledgeable than all."

She already saw the Gryphon, and had all the information we wanted her to preach.

But Eva had yet to find satisfaction.

The young girl who was becoming a bit famous in Centralle was one Novem had introduced to us.

"It will be troublesome if my own story gets out."

I never thought that fabulous aura-like something of mine I'm unable

to conceal would become this troublesome.

Good grief… there's no helping it.

While taking sips of tea, I gave Eva some more specifics on the Gryphon subjugation mission.

From behind Miranda, Shannon whispered.

"That grin of his is creepy."

I spoke.

"Are you jealous? Don't feel so down, I'll play with you later. Oh, right the last Hippogryph was defeated with a bow-and-arrow, and that's the end to it."

As I explained just how inept the squadron had been, and how much trouble it was, Eva seemed overjoyed.

"A story only I'm to know of… this is it! This's what I've been waiting for! A song of heroics that everyone hums of is never enough. As I thought, you have to personally go and find all the details yourself. Ah, I'm sure I can write a fine piece."

It seems she had some confidence in her skill.

"Oh? So you were looking for a heroic tale?"

When I said that, Eva flipped her hair and spoke.

"Yes. A majority of elves share their songs among their tribes. They learn of happenings through their travels, and exchange information with other elves of minstrels… among them, the Nihil Tribe has put a greater majority of songs to memory."

But if they're exchanging information, then shouldn't they all have roughly the same amount of songs?

When I thought that, Novem supplemented some information.

“It’s because some songs fall to waste over time. In that regard, it’s said the Nihil tribe is quite proficient.”

Clara also added on.

“But that’s strange, isn’t it? For a travelling group like that, I can’t think one would try to announce their songs alone, even after entering a city like this.”

It did appear that Eva was singing alone.

There…

“I mean, I’m a runaway.”

From the Jewel hung on my neck, I heard the Fifth’s voice.

The Sixth spoke as well.

『Hmm, a runaway child… just like a certain someone I know.』

As I imagined the Fifth’s grinning face, the Sixth sullenly whispered.

『I-I came back just fine…』

It appears there was quite a bit going on.

“Is running away not rare for your tribe?”

As I said that, Eva shook her head.

“They told me to go get married off to some other tribe, so I went off to become independent! Because I was the third daughter and of marriageable age, they said they’d try marrying me to the next elf tribe they encountered! ”

After hearing that much…

“How cruel.”

“I know, right!?”

But Clara spoke.

“Well, that’s merely the culture of the travelling troupe race known as the elves. Rather than staying within a single tribe, I’ve read it was a practice that originated to gain cooperation among their wide spread. It also carries the importance of having Eva-san share the songs of her own tribe with her new one, I believe.”

There, Eva spoke.

“I would’ve still been fine if it was a troupe they were talking about! But even if I went off with that party of hunters, all I’d be doing would be entertaining my family! There’d be no chance to spread my song! I want my voice to be heard by a large amount of people!”

I leisurely stood.

After the eyes of the female army gathered on me, I spread my arms out wide, and spoke.

“I see. Then why not follow my lead?”

“Why?”

She tilted her head, and I protruded my thump, pointing it at myself.

From within the Jewel, the Third…

『I-is it finally here!?』

I raised my voice, and declared in a tone overflowing with self-confidence…

“I’m a man who’ll become a hero one day! Won’t you be happy seeing such magnificence firsthand? And I’ll be happy having my gallantry handed down… everyone wins! By my side, let’s tell the tale of a hero, Eva!”

『… mr. lyyyllle!! This is the mr. lyle I know!』

I made a sexy pose, and fed-up glances seemed to gather from my surroundings.

I heard some laughter from within the Jewel.

"… I do enjoy comedies, but this is a little…"

Looks like I was rejected, but I'm not one to lose heart from something like that.

"How unfortunate. But feel free to bury yourself in my chest whenever you want. I'll be waiting."

When I gave a wink, Eva turned to Novem.

"… What the hell is with this deplorably handsome man?"

This elf sure is honest. While thinking that, I developed quite a cute impression of her.

"I apologize. He usually isn't like this. It's just that this meeting came with bad timing, and he's currently undergoing a growth."

"Ah…"

The warm eyes Eva sent me after that felt quite comforting.

"Oh don't stare at me like that. You'll fall for me before you know it."

When I offered a warning, the Third let out his voice.

『As expected of mr. lyle!』

The Fifth…

『So it's come. The man who'll become a hero, of perhaps you'll fall for me… which one do you think's better?』

The Sixth was…

『For him to surpass an extra-large serving of love so easily…』

The Seventh.

『Let's tell the tale of a hero isn't too bad either!』

The Fourth brought it all together.

『We've harvested quite a crop this time around. And wait, how about we just send him to the Circry House's head as he is right now… I can't imagine what'll come of it!』

The ancestors all seemed quite delighted.

The Third.

『We already have the preparations in order, so it'll be troublesome if he doesn't make a move. If he fishes up a strange one… well, I guess it doesn't matter!』

Eva seemed worried for Novem.

"Hey, if you ever feel like breaking up, how about coming and traveling with me? If it's you, Novem, you're more than welcome."

Novem was…

"No, the place I belong shall always be by Lyle-sama's side."

As always, she says some pleasant things.

(Loved by Novem, aren't I the luckiest in the world?)

I held absolutely no doubt in the words going through my head.

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Evening.

I borrowed a storehouse in Centralle, and gathered some merchants there.

I get the feeling I said a little I shouldn't have, but it was still recoverable.

(It's fine. I'm still calm.)

Within the dimly lit warehouse, I had prepared a large quantity of lanterns to have them confirm the body of the Gryphon.

"Normally I'd take it to the Guild, but it was in a good condition this time, so I thought there may be someone out there wishing to buy it whole."

When I said that, a single Merchant spoke up.

"Is this really the Gryphon defeated by the dispatched legion? In that case, I'm willing to put up two hundred gold. It's in a favorable state. It at least holds that much worth."

The rumors had already been spread through the capital, and the quick-eared merchants came to me upon hearing Eva's song.

It was something written with a priority on speed, but hearing it, rumors quickly spread about the town's inhabitants, and Eva's popularity shot up quite a ways.

From the start, she had a favorable appearance, and a good voice. A firm groundwork in place.

After that, all she needed to do was grasp at a chance.

(Novem really did procure quite a skilled musician.)

“Yes, it is what I’ve purchased from the expeditionary force without a doubt. These are the documents from that transaction. Also, that force will be returning in the near future, and you’ll see that they have no Gryphon on their persons. To show off, they may have two Hippogryphs atop their carts as they make their arrival, though.”

(Right… only two. The number defeated was three.)

A merchant spoke.

“You paid five hundred for it, correct? Putting out such an amount… doesn’t that leave you much too far in the red?”

I spoke.

“I am no merchant. Learning their army had found out the existence of such a beast, yet still rose to face it, my heart was so moved I couldn’t help but put out such a sum. Of course, I also carried out collection work.”

Monster materials.

Magic Stones, and other valuable had already been sold off by Miranda.

It amounted to roughly thirty gold, but that wasn’t nearly enough.

The Fourth spoke.

『I’d like to collect from two to three hundred here.』

I looked around at the ones gathered.

“I’m fine with waiting until the legion returns as well, but at that point in time, I’m sure the number of buyers will have increased.”

I tried stirring them up, and one raised his hand.

“Two twenty gold!”

And on top of that…

“T… two hundred and forty!”

“Two fifty.”

The merchants arbitrarily began to bid. While listening in on them, I informed them on the specifics of the monster’s condition.

“The visible damage to it is but a single puncture mark. There are no other injuries it suffered in the battle concerned. Just as you can see.”

And in the end, a merchant purchased it whole for a sum as large as three hundred and twenty gold coins.

The Fifth spoke.

『… Isn’t that a little high? I was sure two hundred fifty would be plenty.』

The other merchants filtered out of the warehouse with regretful faces, and I struck up a conversation with the one who made the purchase.

“I’ll come to pick it up first thing in the morning. It doesn’t look like you’ve anything else to sell, but…”

He looked at me with worried eyes, and I replied with a smile.

“Yes, even if you offer a price higher than the market value, I’ve nothing to give as a bonus.”

“Well good. I wanted to procure it with all due haste.”

To the man’s relieved face, I posed a question.

“Did you require a Gryphon so badly?”

“No, there’s an important visitor coming to Centralle, you see, and she’s one who never seems satisfied with any commonplace articles. It would be a huge help to me if you didn’t enquire any further.”

Being told that, I nodded, and continued the talks on how the man would pick it up first thing in the morning.

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… Late night.

Miranda looked at it, frozen in its block of ice in the storehouse.

It was carefully stored into a wooden box, and it was the only box to be found in the entirety of the wide storage room.

Porter was stationed near the wooden box, and Lyle was lying there within it.

“Chickennn Dickheaddd!”

“D-don’t cry, Monica… I would never do something like wasting your cooking full of love… erp!”

The splendid meal the automaton had made in high spirits wasn’t something a mere party of six would be capable of finishing.

Forcing himself to forge onwards, Lyle couldn’t help but lie down.

“It really was tasty, but… what’s that supposed to be? Did she come under the impression we were hosting a party?”

Aria herself had gluttonously dug into quite a large portion of it, so Miranda replied.

“And despite that, you sure did eat a lot. So much dessert as well… you’re sure to get fat.”

There, perhaps finally gaining awareness of the fact she had eaten just

a little too much, Aria's stance hardened.

It seems Clara had taken a liking to an item made through the frying of a potato, and she still wished to eat more.

"While Monica-san may be skilled in the kitchen, her repertoire really is something else. This party may really be quite a luxurious one."

Seeing Clara happily stuff her face, some complicated emotions surfaced in Miranda.

Having experienced Growths, they had all made some embarrassing memories for themselves.

What's more, Clara had thrown out quite a bit of verbal abuse.

(Even so…)

The reason they were on standby like this was for the wooden crate they were quite purposefully showing off.

(Lyle sure has quite a few convenient Skills on him.)

Once the buyers had left, the info on where the Gryphon was kept had spread alongside the rumors of the battle.

It seems Lyle had it in mind that there would be some to try and steal it.

And one of the likely candidates was Miranda's own home.

(I do think they'll take various measures, but… will they really make a move so fast?)

When it came to preparations, Lyle rarely had an oversight.

While she had thought his expenditures a waste, he was quite reliable in finding proper ways to replenish his savings.

Shannon was sleeping on Porter's luggage tray with a blanket

wrapped around her, and Novem was busy nursing Lyle.

There, Lyle went through great pains to raise the upper half of his body, and looked around.

“Well that came faster than expected.”

The warehouse wasn’t even locked.

Having the door broken down would truly be a pain, but leaving it unlocked with the lights on made it more difficult for outsiders to think to enter.

Of course, Miranda did surmise there would be bandits aiming for the Gryphon as well.

She pulled out the dagger hanging at her waist, while Aria rose and put her hands on her short spear.

Novem exited Porter with her staff in hand.

Lyle alone walked boldly to the front of the box, and Monica tagged alongside him.

“Just show yourself already.”

When Lyle said that, several men clad in black plunged in through the warehouse’s window, and a few dozen of them poured in through the open door.

Miranda got into position, but Lyle merely snapped his fingers.

After a metallic sound rung out, and before she knew it, the men who stormed in were lying flat on the iced-over ground.

Looking closely, a wall of ice had surfaced close to the window.

When that disappeared, Lyle took a silver bow in hand.

(It’s much smaller than I heard. Is that not a short bow?)

She had heard it was a large bow, but with his small silver bow in hand, Lyle notched numerous arrows of light, before releasing them towards the ceiling. On their descent each one of them pierced the ground close to one of the men in black.

'Twas a threat.

"Now go home and tell your employer to come himself. That we'll negotiate when he does. And that this Gryphon'll be handed off when morning comes."

Seeing Lyle tap his hand against the crate, the black-clad men raised their vigilance of the party.

Lyle pulled back the bow.

"Or would your failure rather be reported with your corpses?"

As he said that, the men remained vigilant as they made their way outside.

(They were looking at me? And they seemed to be searching for another… Shannon?)

Miranda turned to Porter, and found Shannon poking her head out to see what was going on.

Those black-clad men had exchanged some glances upon seeing the girl, and left.

After a while, the bow returned to its original necklace-form, and Lyle turned to the broken window glass.

"… I'm definitely billing him for that."

Returning to Porter, Lyle told Novem he felt a little better after moving his body a bit.

"… So he knew it all."

Saying that, Miranda sheathed her blade…

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As expected, the Circry House's Head Ralph-san paid a visit to the storehouse.

(After putting up such airs, I've no idea how I would act if it was someone else entirely. How laughable.)

When I whispered in my mind, he came with a number of the dark-garbed men from before.

Nearby, he had even thoughtfully brought a wagon to carry the contents of the crate.

Miranda and Shannon's eyes were looking at the man in a different light than before. They seemed a little surprised.

"… You intentionally brought some merchants in relation with my house here. Is it alright if I work under that assumption?"

Hearing that, I found he was moving exactly as the Ancestors had instructed me, so I did nothing but nod.

"I see. Then let's get to negotiations. It will be troublesome if that Gryphon is to end up anywhere besides the palace. I've prepared two hundred gold. I'm sure it's an adequate pricing."

The Fourth spoke to me.

『So the starting offer is two hundred gold coins… Lyle.』

When I moved to grip the Jewel, the black-clad men behind Ralph-san reacted at once.

It was a little bit amusing.

“I’ve paid a whole five hundred on my side. Also, just look at that… because of you lot, the window of the storehouse we rented is in so many pieces. I’ll have to at least cover the cost of my own expenditure, you know. How does one thousand gold sound to you? If you’ve got some extraneous circumstance, you should at least be prepared to pay out that much.”

Ralph-san spoke in a fed-up tone.

“Oh I’m sure there was some damage on my side of the exchange as well. Understood. I don’t mind if I’m to cover the repair costs for the window. But the five hundred gold was something you arbitrarily spent of your own accord. I’m completely unrelated. If it’s two fifty gold coins, then I’ll pay it.”

It was nowhere near enough, so I smiled and spoke.

“Trying to drive your daughter’s boyfriends- and myself- to our deaths, and that’s the sum you put up? It was my own ineptitude when I took up the request, so how about I lower it to nine hundred and fifty gold?”

“… It’s just that flow of information to our household was a little delayed. If I knew, I surely would never have sent Miranda. To even drag little Shannon along… what a terrible man you are. Three hundred.”

“Make sure you put a gold somewhere after the number, my dear fiend. And make sure to give a warm welcome to those lover boys in question who’ve finally racked up some merit… Nine hundred gold.”

The negotiations continued on as such, with me offering seven hundred gold.

Ralph-san presented a price of four hundred.

The Fourth…

『Looks like it's around the point where you're finally starting to make a profit. It's fine to stop it here, but the problem lies in the fee for the request he issued you.』

The Fourth's grinning face surfaced in my head.

"… Six hundred gold coins. Including the fee for your request, doesn't it sound oh-so cheap? You'll get this beast the expeditionary force sold off. A request to guard two people, what's more, I even got them to perform some distinguished service."

Ralph scoffed.

"How shameless… I never put in a request to give them brownie points. In the first place, I never knew a Gryphon would come out at that stage. I'm sure there were some mistakes on my end, but from start to finish, my request was for nothing more than you to protect those two from a Hippogryph. It looks like you fail to grasp a father's heart."

Shameless? Look who's talking.

While holding those impressions, I spoke.

"… Five hundred fifty gold. Any more is impossible."

There, Ralph-san as well.

"Five hundred gold. Any further, and I'll consider use of physical means."

Around were the black-clad men, and they had now turned into the man's trump card.

Since his daughters were there, he likely didn't want to injure them, but asking for any more would surely lead to further disputes.

I decided to fold.

"Understood. Oy."

“Yes, Lyle-sama.”

I had Novem open up a part of the crate, letting the oversized head of an eagle come into view.

It was frozen quite solidly, and the white frosted-over contents made it difficult to make out, but my opponent did confirm it.

Ralph-san tossed a leather bag over to me.

I picked the jingling bag off of the ground, and had Monica confirm its contents.

After measuring its weight, she looked at my face, and nodded.

“Negotiations complete. I’ll send you the invoice for the window later.”

“I’d prefer it you didn’t request an exorbitant sum. You are quite a greedy one.”

I laughed.

“I’m not one for lies. I’ll demand nothing but the repair cost for the warehouse. Even like this, I’m still under the impression that I’m an honest man.”

(Right, Lyle hasn’t told a lie!)

And like that, Ralph-san motioned his subordinates to leave, and we warily watched them off.

While watching his men transport the crate, he spoke to Miranda.

“… Doris and Lucy are unreliable. Miranda, do you have any mind to return?”

Hearing that, Shannon seemed quite down.

Miranda spoke.

"… So you'll never say such things to Shannon, will you. I don't want to be involved any more. Driving me out and bringing me back in after all this time? As if. Who are you trying to fool?"

Hearing her lack of intent to return, Ralph-san merely whispered, 'I see,' to himself.

The crate was moved out, and following behind, Ralph-san didn't turn to us again.

I asked Miranda and Shannon.

"Are you sure about this? The both of you?"

There, Shannon responded.

"A-as if I want to return to a house like that!"

Her eyes were tearing up.

Miranda was…

"Just by returning, there'll be unfavorable rumors that'll surface. Whatever the case, it isn't a comfortable place to be."

And to the two of them…

"How about you honestly say you decided to choose me? I'll make sure you never regret it."

When I said that, Shannon looked straight at me.

"Looks like you haven't recovered yet."

And said that.

Novem spoke.

"No matter what Lyle-sama you are, I'll still like you… and um, well,

I think it will get hard from now on, but please do your best."

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The next day.

In the warehouse, I accepted the payment from the merchant who purchased the Gryphon.

To my dark expression, the merchant raised quite a bright tone.

"The expeditionary force that returned earlier this morning all seemed so calm. As I thought, they truly looked like an experienced army. Somewhat threatening, really."

(Yes, just like me, they were likely all in regret over the memories they wanted to forget.)

I accepted the bag of gold, and handed the Gryphon over to the merchant.

"The first had its head in quite a state, and the second looked like it was shot through the stomach. I'm sure it was quite a vicious battle."

(The ones who did that were me and Aria.)

I put the money away, and handed the man some documents to confirm the details with Norma later.

There.

"There's plenty of worth in the Gryphon defeated by the heroes of the expeditionary force, but more than anything, I'm glad I made the purchase in time to welcome our important customer."

Apparently, she was quite satisfied hearing she would get a Gryphon

in quite a good condition.

“It’s just as much a saving grace for me.”

“Well, nice doing business with you.”

Seeing the smiling man and his party leave with the Gryphon loaded on his cart, I waved my hand in parting.

Miranda walked to my side.

“Like hell you’re not one for lies. Damn swindler.”

She poked her elbow at me in good humor, so I embarrassingly spoke.

“… I-I didn’t lie, you know.”

Right, I didn’t lie. Not a single soul said I would be selling a Gryphon.

What was negotiated with Ralph-san was a Hippogryph.

That’s all the frozen body had been, and the man had purchased a mere Hippogryph for five hundred gold coins.

This should be enough comeuppance for fooling us all.

Miranda put her hand to her smiling lips.

“And I’ve chosen you, Lyle, so make sure I won’t regret it. Well, quite a bit’s happened this time around, but it was fun, so all’s well.”

My face turned bright red, as I turned my eyes to the ground.

Monica seemed disappointed.

“… Looks like the Chicken Dickwad’s Fever Time has ended. When is the next one scheduled for?”

She asked me with quite a serious expression.

I looked at her face.

“As if I’d ever do it again.”

I swore in my heart, but the Sixth’s voice escaped from the Jewel.

『Lyle… it’s because you think that way that everyone’s troubled. But let me tell you, this time was interesting. 』

Building my resentment for the Sixth’s smiling face, I swore for the third time to never go through this sadness again.

Chapter 2: Singer

… Eva of Nihil.

The third daughter of the tribe known as the Nihil, she took flight from her travelling troupe and ended up in Centralle with the intentions of travelling further away.

Singing her songs to pay her lodging, she was currently spinning out a certain tale.

“The squad lead by Norma arrived in Johnny Village. Thinking it was but a Hippogryph, they had not a hundred men!”

How many times does that make this?

In the can to her front dropped small and normal copper coins. Sometimes, even large coppers were thrown in, telling her of her own tale of success.

“Unable to abandon the village in danger, the one to stand was Norma, head of the force!”

“That Norma did…?”
“Yeah, likely story.”
“But in all truth, she did parade in with a Hippogryph.”
“And no Gryphon, right?”

Hearing that, Eva spoke on with a smile.

“A highly skilled adventurer who aided the mission. He tried to flee, but Norma held him down! The defeated Gryphon shall belong to you! So pay in advance! Breaking under Norma’s earnest persuasion, that adventurer promised his cooperation, and earned the right to buy the beast for five hundred gold!”

Without an instrument on hand, she had asked some nearby minstrels to provide musical accompaniment.

Those around were also aiding in her profits, and there seemed to be no break in the crowd of those flocking around her.

(I never thought they'd get this heated up over it. As I thought, fresh material really is important!)

Rejoicing on how she heard the story first, Eva proudly let the crowd hear the story while wearing her clothing made for business.

She did want to tell it in song, but her song had yet to be completed, so she could only preach.

She had received payment from Novem, and was instructed to spread the details to other singers as well.

In exchange, what Eva sought for was the truth.

(A truth only I'm to know of… I'll sing the hell out of it one day!)

And a large crowd continued to grow around Eva as she chronicled their exploits.

The expeditionary force had just returned, so all over the place were singers imitating the girl after having heard the tale from her mouth.

Having rumors spread was a good thing, so Eva didn't really mind it.

The speech reached its final stage…

"And like that, the Expeditionary Force brought down the mighty Gryphon. Heroes numbering only one hundred… you all have seen them too, have you not? The faces of the great men who slew the beast!"

When the squadron had returned, quite a large number had gathered to meet them.

When the talks ended…

"Oy, come to think of it, I did see a party dragging around a Gryphon

at the gate a while back."
"Ah, that one! Then they really did do it."
"That Norma did? I'm still in doubt here, man."

With a smile, Eva…

"If you'd like to hear the stories of individual heroes, then find me here tomorrow!"

It was only for a short while today, but the earnings were several times over her usual amount.

The dispersing crowd seemed to return to their business happily, having gained a new topic of conversation.

Eva paid the fees of the Elf Minstrels she had asked for the music.

She addressed the two tall young men.

"You two have nice voices. Want to work here tomorrow as well?"

"We're thinking of leaving Centralle already. Eva of the Nihil Tribe, was it? Happy we could do business with you."

And with that, she saw off the two with their instruments. She began thinking over what to treat herself to with the day's earnings…

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… The Royal Palace.

After turning in her reports on the expedition, Norma made an enervated expression.

Her aide Clark was the same.

“I’m thankful to receive such words of praise from his majesty, but that meeting was much too stiff.”

While she said that, she did send joyous glances towards the medal she received.

Seeing her, Clark let out a sigh.

He had received the very same medal, but he couldn’t find it in himself to be happy over it.

“What’s wrong? Your promotion is now a given. There’s nothing more for you to ask for. You’ll also be an official decurio soon.”

Clark spoke.

“Yes, I’m thankful for that. But a group that large has risen in rank. On top of that, even if they may be without heritage rights, an order of new knights have come to be. You can’t look down at the yearly annuity that’ll cost.”

Norma spoke.

“And that’s the job of the civil officials.”

Clark responded.

“And you don’t think this incident may have been contrived by those very same officials? Just where do you expect them to produce the money to pay such a number?”

Perhaps not wanting to think about it, Norma averted her eyes.

Her spirits sunk at Clark’s premonitions of ill fortune.

(What a pessimist. That’s exactly why he never got promoted. But, with this, I’ll officially be a centurio… Finally back to the starting point.)

Norma had no parents to speak of.

A mother she lost at a young age.

A father killed in battle.

And within her family's plummeting status, and those around distancing themselves, Norma tried to do whatever she could to return the House to its former status.

A small change made a big difference.

Regain the glory of the past, the honor of the House…

With that in mind, she frantically kept her eyes on rising up.

(With this reward, I'll just name my brother my successor, and take my place as legal guardian. My ill repute and all else need not get in the boy's way…)

The Arnette House was still accepted by the world as a military family… that's what Norma thought to herself.

She was merely displeased with the fall of the House's rank.

Because her father, who sacrificed himself for a mission received a negative evaluation for such an act.

She entered a knight brigade, and became knowledgeable on such matters.

That when the Arnette House had fallen, a new house had manifested to take its payroll.

What's more, imperial nobles… a house created for the sole purpose of giving a second or third son something to succeed.

(The king has given me his praise. This time I'll be on the side that takes.)

Seeing the darkened smile on Norma's face, Clark could do nothing but let out a sigh…

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“… Why did I do it yet again…”

On top of a bed at the inn, I sat with my arms around my knees. While my stomach did hurt quite a bit, I had received a considerable amount of psychological damage.

Since morning, I didn’t want to meet a single soul.

After handing over the Gryphon to the merchant, I spaced out with a dark expression on my face.

Hearing a knock on the door, I shouted out in reply.

“Is it Novem? Come in.”

“Pardon me. Lyle-sama, how does your stomach feel?”

I just ate too much.

On top of the pain, I also felt quite heavy.

And perhaps because I felt quite cornered mentally, I’ll bet my expression is locked in quite a gloomy one.

“… Terrible. In various ways.”

“R-really.”

Perhaps Novem understood my sentiment, as she left what she brought atop the room’s table.

“I’ve prepared some soup, so please eat it.”

"… I don't want to eat anything."

When I buried my face into my knees, Novem picked up the bowl and spoon.

"Just a little is enough. I've put in herbs that work for overeating. Now…"

Novem made an 'aaaah' sound, and I let the soup come into my mouth.

It went down easily, and tasted great.

"… If only I hadn't been in such high spirits."

As I sat regretfully, Novem made a bitter smile.

"It happens to everyone."
"But never to you, Novem?"

When I said that, Novem…

"Well… my constitution is one where the change is never too prominent."

Hearing her say it quite bluntly, I only got even more depressed.

The Sixth…

『Lyle, you really are a pain in the ass. It's more or less an experience everyone out there goes through. Get over it already.』

There, the Seventh spoke.

『That's right Lyle. That Sixth over there is a man who turned defiant, ran away from the house, came back, and got over it. Normally, they don't come back, you know. But with a calm face, that guy…』

The Fifth too.

『Ah, right, that did happen. Did I tell you that one?』

The Seventh spoke.

『Yes, I heard it from my grandfather.』

The Sixth seemed flustered. The memories of the heads of the past remained up to the point they last touched the Jewel. They didn't have all the memories up to their deaths.

『Don't say it!!』

The runaway delinquent boy. The Sixth.

While it makes for good material to tease him on, I'm here boldly offering up even better material, so there's nothing I can do about it.

I want to forget.

I want to make it so it never came to be.

"Now, Lyle-sama… aaaaah."

"Aaaah."

The spoon came in my mouth, and I drank the soup.

The Fourth spoke in an irritated tone.

『… If you're that depressed, then quit it with the shameless flirting.』

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Dinner time.

I endured the embarrassment, came down to the inn's first floor, and ate alongside everyone.

A downhearted Monica held her twin tails in both hands, and fidgeted with them.

The fact that I became bedridden came as quite a shock, or that she was lamenting her own ineptitude, or something.

(Well, it's Monica, so it'll be fine.)

Unlike yesterday, I ate a small portion. I addressed everyone on our future objectives.

"I plan to head on to the free city of Beim. It's known as the city of adventurers, and merchants and goods are found in abundance. After getting our equipment in order, we can take a coupled carriage, but… are there any opinions on the matter?"

Maybe Shannon thought it was irrelevant to her, as she continued with her meal.

Are you really okay with that? Or so I thought, when Miranda scolded Shannon into participation.

"Hey, you listen up too!"

"Don't hit me! I'm properly listening, you hear. Beim, right? The free city of Beim. Even I know of it."

Rather than not being a part of any specific country, it was more that its affiliation was never made certain.

It's best to think of it as a country in itself.

It had its own port, and carried out trade. A large quantity of adventurers and mercenaries resided there.

Clara spoke.

“Beim also holds the Guild’s main headquarters. Of course, the number of adventurers and mercenary brigades is high, there are more than four locations usable as receptions desks. I doubt we’ll be visiting the headquarters, but it seems you’ll have to consider where you plan to use as a main receptionist.”

The city couldn’t be self-reliant on food supplies, and they bought them from surrounding countries and lords.

Its border didn’t come into contact with Bahnseim’s, so a coupled carriage would only take us as far as Bahnseim’s national border.

While gnawing on a piece of ham, Aria…

“Doesn’t it have horrid public order? A party full of women with one lone man… we won’t be targeted?”

With her growing manly aura, I was about to tell Aria, ‘You’ll be fine,’ but she glared at me, so I kept my mouth shut.

Novem spoke.

“We’ve been planning to go to Beim for a while. While we may have few companions at the moment, if the party grows any larger in scale, we’ll require a higher maintenance cost. While the probability of us being targeted isn’t zero, I doubt it will fluctuate much even if we had a few more.”

If it’s in regards to money, we’ve been earning a lot as of late.

I mean, there was a certain noble who put out five hundred gold for a Hippogryph.

About the problem with numbers, if we plan on increasing any further, we’ll have to start hiring more support in all actuality.

We’ll also have to rotate offense.

Clara spoke.

“This party is superior when it comes to ability, but with its nature, getting a male will be difficult. Even if you want to gather more women, I think that will be difficult within Centralle.”

Aria had finished eating, and was reaching her hand out for a drink.

“Should we try recruiting elsewhere?”

Clara shook her head.

“There are a number of small Guilds on the way to Beim. The adventurers working at such places are usually there out of attachment to the location, so it will be difficult.”

Even adventurers had the concept of home.

Travelling around, challenging the labyrinths, gathering comrades, and adventuring even more…

It’s not like they’re all like that.

Miranda spoke.

“Before heading to Beim, we’ll have to get our luggage in order. I’ll bet they have a better selection of goods there than here… if we buy a ticket, we can get to the border, and after that…”

Novem spoke.

“Rather than looking into it, I just asked Eva-san, but it seems that while in Bahnseim, Beim and some other places make use of coupled carriages, a larger portion of places do not.”

Meaning we might be going on foot.

Monica revived.

“Then it’s time to roll out Porter! I, Monica will take care of all the modifications!”

Shannon spoke.

“So it’s already decided? Ah…”

“What?”

Shannon was looking at me with a face that seemed to want to say something.

“I refrained from asking it up to now, but…”

“Yeah, what is it?”

She spoke to me.

“Just what is the goal of this party supposed to be? They usually have one, right? Like growing to the scale of a mercenary brigade, or raising your name, and coming under the service of some country, or something like that.”

Hearing that, I stayed silent.

Miranda…

“… Yeah, I’ve yet to hear it as well, but could it be there isn’t one?”

Aria was…

“I-I want to become first rate as an Adventurer… I don’t know about the rest.”

Clara.

“Well, getting in experience is important for support, and if I follow alongside this party, I’m sure to encounter quite a bit. I’m thinking of opening up a bookstore in the future.”

Novem spoke.

“Lyle-sama’s goal is to become a top-class adventurer, and to be

surrounded by women. The fruition of such a goal is coming quite close."

I covered my face with both my hands, and turned red to my ears.

"That's wrong. While I definitely said it, I never thought it'd actually get underway."

And as cold eyes began to gather on me, Monica…

"Be at ease, Chicken Dickwad. I shall always be by your side. I'll never part, you hear… I'll definitely never part, so prepare yourself, dammit!"

As she drew closer, I hit her on the head.

"Don't get so excited all of a sudden. You're scaring the children."

"… Kuh, it's a pain that none of my databases work on him. Is this that so-called generation gap?"

I thought.

(While she may be saying something, I'm sure she's wrong.)

The conversation had derailed, so I put all the opinions together.

"Um, well then, we'll be taking care of preparations for the voyage to Beim. Rest a while, and recover energy, while gathering information on the free city."

There weren't any particular objections voiced, so I finalized the trip to Beim.

(Come to think of it, I'll be getting some free time, but how should I spend it?)

Even if I'm to collect info, it's only for the trip.

Like how their current state is, or which roads would be safest.

That’s all I need to learn.

(… Maybe I should get a hobby. And messing around a bit doesn’t sound bad.)

That’s what I thought.

Chapter 3: The Underside of a Promotion

… Within the palace.

Having been called there, Clark and Norma stood still as they accepted their paperwork.

Norma shouted out a protest to the minister before her.

“What is the meaning of this!? A demotion to award success!?”

The minister spoke.

“Demotion? Are you not making a mountain of a mole hill? It has been accepted from times long passed that granting land to a knight who performs well is a valid reward. Just think about it… your current annuity, or an income much greater than that of your current position.”

Such words came from the minister’s greasy face, but Norma still wasn’t satisfied.

She had kept at it as a knight of the imperial court.

She couldn’t accept suddenly being made into a provincial noble.

Even if they were calling it land, it was merely a remote region the court was having trouble deciding on a governor for.

Its population didn’t even cross two hundred.

Clark asked the minister.

“B-but sir. S-should I not be made a decurio…”

“Your loyalty has been factored into evaluation. You’ve done your part finely for over ten years as a knight. With this, you have your own peerage as well.”

He was granted his own court rank, and accepted as a feudal lord.

What's more, his remote region made him Norma's neighbor.

"… Are you certain this isn't a demotion!?"

When it came to finances, a court centurio did, sure enough, fall behind a feudal lord noble.

But living in the capital and the sticks couldn't be compared.

Managing a territory was quite hectic work.

Living in the capital was the option much more appealing to Norma.

"I'm telling you to shut your mouth. You've received such favorable treatment simply because the public sees you as heroes. The knights who rose in rank. Those that have become knights from this point onwards… I wonder just where their salary is going to come from? Be thankful that you even got awarded anything."

Clark thought.

(But you just threw out some remote region you thought of as a pain to manage yourselves!)

His situation was practically identical.

A settlement of around a hundred and twenty heads.

"Don't think too hard on it. The peerage within the capital strives to maintain the status quo. Even if you're the lowest rank, you're a splendid noble, you know?"

Provincial nobles didn't have to pay taxes to the palace, but at the same time, their income didn't come from it.

Knowing that, Clark had worried over the possibility ever since he had returned alive.

Norma was truly making a pale expression.

“It’s an award from his majesty. It couldn’t be that you’re denying it, are you?”

As if he knew everything, the minister was making quite a splendid smile.

And his face turned earnest.

“An important guest is paying a visit to Centralle. We can’t be spending all our time on these paltry maters. Now return and finish your paperwork with all due haste.”

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… The Circry House.

Ralph made a fist, and slammed it down hard on his desk.

The Hippogryph he had bought under Lyle’s deception was in pieces once the ice melted.

… This is the Hippogryph your dear daughter slew…
… Thank you for the purchase! Parental love FTW…

Was written on the paper stuck to the back.

The rumors had it as two Hippogryphs and one Gryphon.

When the expeditionary force had returned, he had confirmed their two Hippogryphs.

Just when he had been feeling relieved, a rumor came to ear of how a merchant purchased the Gryphon.

“That brat…”

Letting out a strained voice, Ralph stared at the document on the desk.

He had hoped for the annihilation, or heavy loss of the expeditionary force.

That didn’t go so well. When the squadron returned with merits on their backs, the palace hurriedly moved to gather the appropriate funds.

But a number close to one hundred got promoted.

Bitter as it may seem, if they didn’t issue out promotions, the palace’s reputation would plummet.

The plans within the palace were torn up, as they searched for means to deal with it.

And the Circry house went through a large change due to the issue.

Due to his mistake in presenting the Hippogryph, he had some responsibility shoved onto himself.

His peerage was lowered a rank.

His position and status followed along.

The Circry House was now demoted to a Baron House.

Those around likely recognized them as on the road to ruin, and their relations would likely start to gradually decline.

“Just how hard do you think our family’s struggled to maintain this position…”

He was overcome with irritation, but managed to reset his expression with some deep breaths.

He changed his train of thought.

“I’ll have to cut down on a number of servants now. I guess I can finally be free of Breid…”

Deciding his first course of action would be to fire Breid, Ralph thought over Marcus, who had mover up a rank in the imperial court from his achievements.

“… I guess he’s more decent than Breid? But that isn’t nearly enough to maintain the Circry House. Whether they marry or not, it looks like I’ll have to place my hopes on whatever grandchildren I’m to have.”

He stood, and turned his mind to his two remaining daughters.

The second daughter Doris, and third daughter Lucy. All spoiled because Miranda was already there.

Somehow to get those two off to an outside…

He decided to send them off to some provincial noble for the purpose of education.

“It has to be as strict a place as possible. That’ll give them all the more opportunities to learn of reality. We really should keep a distance from Centralle until things work themselves out.”

Since the Walt House was visiting Centralle, Ralph had raised his vigilance.

“… It may become surprisingly rough here. I’ll play with the fringe parties a while.”

Having misgivings of the state of the capital as of late, Ralph was to use this opportunity to gain a little distance from it.

And…

“… ‘Tis a pity for Miranda. But with a man that competent, I’m sure it’ll be fine. Shannon will be safe enough as well.”

Making the momentary expression of a father, he quickly returned to

his earnest face.

“I’ll admit my defeat this time around. For him to be so crafty at that age… There’s no way that boy’s going to become a decent adult.”

While thinking over how he wasn’t one to talk, Ralph walked down the halls of his mansion…

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“… How strange.”

I dropped by a certain casino in Centralle, but after entering the establishment with a single gold coin in hand, I ended up leaving with one gold and one silver.

Card, coin, I tried my hand at various things, but it never seemed to click with me.

“What should I do… this isn’t fun at all.”

When I said that, the Sixth spoke.

『Lyle, do you hate to gamble? You know, that adrenaline rush that comes when you risk it all?』

I rolled the Jewel with my fingertip to signal my denial, and the Fifth called out.

『Just what fun is there supposed to be in gambling? Sixty spent, forty earned, was it? You’d surely earn more by owning a casino itself. Nothing but a complete waste of time.』

An opinion fitting of one devoted to efficiency.

But there…

『No, but this sort of thing's important too. The real problem was that if you didn't control them, they started getting less legal by the minute, so I left the Virden House to manage them.』

Hearing that, those besides the Third, Fourth up…

『Wait… the hells with that!?』

『Oy, could it be that big boss of the underground was…』

『… No wonder I could never smoke him out. The Virden House… Dame ungrateful bastards!!』

『With that loyal mask of theirs, were they laughing to themselves as they participated in the countermeasure meetings against them? Just how much pain do you think I…』

(Ah, come to think of it, there was something like that on our territory…)

When I recalled the underground organization keeping the brigands of the Weiss territory in order, the ancestors began quarrelling over the measures they had raised to put a stop to them in the past.

The Third spoke in a cheerful tone.

『Ah, I forgot to tell you. Sorry, sorry, my bad. I mean, I totally died in battle, you see?』

(There's really no objection you can raise to that defense.)

The Fourth spoke.

『That may be the case! Yet still, you freaking formed an evil organization for your own agenda, and put us through tribulations for years to come… AAAaaaAAaaAH!!』

The Virden house.

I remembered the next head of the Virden House, my senior disciple.

When I went to learn swordsmanship, I received training alongside him.

(Alfred, huh.)

He's already sworn allegiance to my sister Celes, and one of those who called me the good-for-nothing of the Walt House.

Up to a point, I'm sure he was a kind brotherly figure, but at present, I don't have any decent memories left of him.

Passing through the exit of the casino, I listened in on the voices from the Jewel as I merged into a crowded street.

Using Skills, I kept my distance with whatever pickpockets were interested in me, and continued listening in.

『And when I tried marrying off a daughter, they rejected! Did they think we'd find them out? God dammit…』

The Fifth reminisced on his own time, and stored in some anger for the Virden House.

The Sixth as well.

『They never had the intentions of hostility. They just wanted to parasitize off of us… no wonder my Skill never reacted!』

Vexed. Quite vexed he was.

The Seventh.

『Damn you Virdens… drinking up all the honey we offered, and sneering at us all the same!』

There, I thought.

(Can the current me beat Alfred?)

At least in sparring, I was never able to win to the end. There was our difference in age, but that last time, we locked blades without holding back.

I remembered feeling something that could be called bloodlust, and cramping up.

And…

"Ah, it's the hero."

Almost jumping at the sudden voice, I looked around to find- wearing comfortable clothing on the top, and short pants that looked as if they were stuck fast to her body below- Eva waving her hand at me.

She was making a slightly tired expression.

"Eva? … -san?"

"Oh, you really are quite different from yesterday. That was interesting, so I wanted to talk to that you at least once more before it wore off."

As she directed a smile like that of a mischievous child, I scratched my face, and felt it redden.

"So what business do you have with me, Eva-san?"

"Just Eva's fine. I thought I might as well give thanks for last time. I did earn quite a bit from it."

And to her, I…

"Well I'm glad for that. By thanks, you mean…?"

"How does lunch sound?"

I thought for a moment.

"Then make it on my treat, and treat me to some dessert. I made just a

little at the casino."

When I said that, she asked me.

"That's surprising. You don't look like the type. So how much did you win?"

"One gold coin invested, one silver profit."

She made a questionable expression.

"I-I see… a gold's a bit too large for my wallet. One gold invested, and a silver earned… d-dicey, perhaps? In that case, I'll leave the meal to you and buy you a dessert. I was just getting hungry."

The hour was a little passed noon.

I took Eva around to find a moderately priced restaurant, and she gave her own recommendation.

"There's a store I heard about upon coming to Centralle that I don't mind leading you to. Follow me."

Saying that, she led me off to a store quite separated from the main road.

Entering, I found it relatively compact, but well-tended to.

A large majority of the customers were elves.

"Is it alright for me to enter?"

"It's fine. You're a customer as long as you pay for the title."

She went and sat at a counter seat, so I took a seat beside her.

As she started talking of how her earnings for the day were the best since she had come to Centralle, the elf manager came over to our seats.

"Eva's boyfriend? Even when you said songs would be your only

love… the young'uns will grief over this one."

The one who said that with a smile was a young male elf.

But Eva was…

"Can it, old man. Ah, this man is Lyle, my precious source of information! Cut him a discount, will 'ya?"

I raised my head in shock upon hearing the manager be called an old man, and perhaps understanding from the gesture, he began to explain.

"It's because elves show signs of age slower than the other races. It's been quite a while, and yet I still look like this. Now then, about that discount for our precious customers. I guess regulars are important."

I left it to Eva, so she began ordering.

The manager returned to the depths of the store, and an waitress hurriedly came up to us.

"I-I've brought your water."

"You… the manager already took our order, you know."

On Eva's tired expression, the young female elf girl hung her head.

"Eh? Is she the manager's daughter?"

When I said that, Eva shook her head.

"She isn't that much older than me, but she's the wife. Don't try hitting on her or anything."

"… And I'm just wondering exactly what impression you seem to have of me."

There, a voice came from the Jewel.

It was the Fourth.

『I doubt there's any helping it. Think back to these past few days, and just try giving an objection. Out with it!』

His voice was quite cheerful, and it ended up bringing back memories of the past few days.

The more I tried to bury them, the more vividly they revived in my head.

(Wrong. That me surely isn't the real me!)

The Fifth spoke.

『Normally, you'd be able to manage it better the more times you experience it, but in your case… if a normal person had your Skill, perhaps they would have gone through more than five growths by now. You need a ridiculous amount of experience, and grow in proportion, so I don't think your psyche can build up a resistance, you know.』

Even if you lay it out like that, like hell I'm just going to accept it!

My expression became dark. Eva moved in to console me.

"W-wait! It was just a joke. And wait, when you have so many women following you around, why is it that your mental fortitude is so low?"

I spoke to her.

"A past I wanted to forget simply came back to me. Don't you have something like that as well?"

She shook her head.

"In the high tensions following a Growth, all that happens is that I recall some old songs and such. I've heard quite a lot, but… we don't go through as drastic of changes as humans do."

I'm beginning to envy the elves.

“But it was interesting, so isn’t that enough? It’s something to talk about in times to come, so why not get over it?”

“I never asked for this!”

The surrounding employees nervously attempted to halt our momentum.

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After finishing my meal with Eva, I began contemplating just how I should spend my day off again, when I spotted Clark-san looking to be in quite a hurry.

He was paying a visit to a store dealing in agricultural tools, and ferrying out negotiations.

The shopkeeper declined him with a strained expression, and on hearing that, Clark-san hung his shoulders.

Unable to fathom why an imperial knight like him would have a need for farm tools, I decided to call out to him.

“Clark-san!”

Oh, it’s Lyle-kun.“”

We sat on a nearby bench together, and after hearing out his situation, the Third spoke.

『A settlement of population under a hundred and twenty, is it…』

To the man who had suddenly become a feudal lord, I had absolutely no idea what to say.

“So you’ve become a lord all of a sudden?”

“I was surprised myself, but I’ve no choice but to abide the royal decree. Still, I haven’t the slightest idea what to do with everything going on…”

Norma-san was to become one as well, apparently, and she didn’t seem too happy about it.

The Fourth spoke.

『It’s because there’re various types of settlements. If they don’t have the right skilled workers, they’ll be forced to cooperate with the surrounding provinces. Perhaps it’s simply too hard on an imperial knight…』

The Fifth was…

『The lord of a settlement, I see. Well, based on location, it may be a tasty proposition, but a large majority of them are fated to be destitute.』

The Sixth.

『We have more knowledge on managing settlements than anything the man’ll find on paper over here.』

The Seventh

『Personally, I think he should get in touch with whoever’s going to be his superior. If he doesn’t get a better grasp of a situation, He can’t make a proper move.』

Hearing that opinion, the Third laughed.

『Ahahaha, just what do you think you’re talking about, men… there is absolutely nothing he can do at this point.』

I gripped the Jewel in search of an explanation.

Seeing Clark-san’s enervated expression, I wanted to have some advice to give.

(Please throw me a bone here!)

Sensing my intentions, the Third went on.

『Listen here. Even if a Feudal Lord is dispatched all of a sudden, he's pretty much a stranger. He's got to live a year or two there, and learn the rules of the land. While the palace's may be muddled, the human relations of any small settlement can be just as varied. Only after understanding all of that should he think about the direction to push the territory.』

The Fourth spoke.

『… If there's a governor at the moment, meeting him may be a good idea as well. If that governor has a manor or something there, he'd better set up a meeting while he's still in the capital, or it will become a pain.』

The Third spoke.

『Just buy the manor, why don't you? If I may add on, information on the present state brings in money. Whatever governor'd be happy to divulge information to the hero who slayed a Gryphon, I'm telling you!』

In a sense, isn't that a threat?

As I thought that, the Third Generation offered some advice.

『The standard is to hear a specialist's opinion, make modifications, and mediate if a problem pops up. Even if you call them all feudal lords, it's not like all of them take care of everything, and all he really has to do is socialize with his villagers while keeping a set distance. Do what you have to, and don't get too involved. That's all it takes for one to be thought of as a splendid lord.』

Is that really enough? That's what I thought.

But here, the Fourth…

『Right. You should ask Clark if he has any heirs. I'm sure he can

make a few petitions to the court as well. The knowledge from my time is old, so I'm not fully certain.』

The Third spoke to me.

『Lyle, look at who you're speaking to. Clark-san will find a way fitting of him, so just give some safe advice for now.』

I passed on the advice to Clark-san.

"Um…"

"Hm?"

To a depressed Clark-san, I handed on the Ancestors' advice.

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… After proceeding to the palace, Clark carried out a petition for a transition of authority.

"Father, I'm quite certain that fifteen is quite a bit too young for a feudal lord."

The boy who was a little shorter than Clark was quite flustered.

In regards to his son, Clark spoke.

"Even if it may just be in shape, it's not a bad deal to have you become a lord here. Returning and requesting an audience after we head all the way there will take a considerable amount of time. And if it's now, they should be a little more accommodating."

"Because you're the Gryphon slaying hero? While I know you're earnest, I still can't believe you really did anything like that."

While thinking over how his son really had a good eye for people, Clark continued pacing in the palace.

He was going to stop by the house of the knight previously dispatched as governor to the land, and if that man held a manor there, he was going to buy it off of him.

A majority of governors did have something like that, and they were discarded as easily as loose change.

(If you pile up dust… not the nicest story.)

(TL: This is half of the idiom 'If you pile up dust, it will eventually become a mountain.')

In order to carry out life over there, he asked for necessary information from former governors, and made preparations according.

Clark's son seemed quite worn out from the succession paperwork and all else.

"We're just going right home after this one, right?"

"Sorry… after this, you'll be having a marriage interview."

"Eh?"

Clark persisted he had forgotten to bring it up, and offered an apology.

"All the way over there, well… it seems finding a wife will be a living hell. And it seems keeping some connection to the capital is best."

"I-I never heard of this!"

To his panicked son, Clark desperately spoke up the things he had forgot to mention.

"I'm sorry! But they have it hard on their side as well. I mean, they have all the meetings with the second and third sons of craftsmen, and have to pay visits to them too… and you see, if it's now, the name of the

Gryphon slayer will get you through. Now's all we have."

"… With this, I'm sure we'd all be better off if you didn't kill the beast."

"… Don't say it."

His son only knew the official story on the matter, so Clark didn't get angry at him.

(Even so, there's quite a lot to do.)

He was better off than not knowing what to do at all, but now his head was spinning from the excess work. On top of that, he was also thinking to take up immigrants from Centralle.

If he did that, the population would increase, so the palace would pay out an additional subsidiary aid payment.

(Next, for whoever looks like they'd be reliable on military matters… I really should have learned a bit more from Lyle-kun on that one. Never thought he'd know that much alone.)

Clark was thankful, but he hadn't the slightest idea his knowledge on the matter came from the ancestors in the Jewel…

Chapter 4: The Third's Past

It transpired in a café of the Capital.

Trying to somehow pass by my day off, I tagged along with Clara when she went out.

Following on her quest to buy a book, we circled around the book stores of the Imperial Capital to find one she had yet to read before, and it became noon before we knew it.

As per usual, she had been too concentrated on the task at hand to remember anything pertaining to food, so I gave a bitter smile as I treated her to lunch.

After the meal, I sipped some tea as I checked over the volume Clara had purchased.

The title 【The Miracle of Remlrandt】 was written on the cover, and it covered the details of the war that engraved the Third's name and the Walt House's name into the history of the country.

While reading it, I…

(Ain't happening.)

Within the world of the book, 【Sleigh Walt】 was supposedly a Baronet.

(TL: Baronet is the class between knight and baron.)

The book depicted him as giving counsel to the king.

Its time period was one where Bahnseim destroyed a country known as Remlrandt, and greatly expanded its landmass.

The country often waged wars on neighboring nations, but it lacked what could be called a decisive blow.

And so small victories continued piling up, and the country's land expanded in quite a plain fashion.

However, Remlrandt was also a large superpower, and the first to press the Bahnseim Kingdom so hard.

The reason the Third grew so famous was because he made himself a sacrifice to attain victory in a battle that had to be won at all costs, but…

『My liege! We must divide up the army here. If the enemy directs their power on a single point, our numbers are too scarce! Our stronghold is much too fragile!』

The King.

『I know that, Sleigh. But if we do not put up a fight here, the future holds nothing for the Kingdom of Bahnseim. Against this encroaching enemy force, if we don't gain a large victory here, they will merely continue to wear us down. Our only option is to throw the dice here!』

The Third.

『My liege… I understand. I, Sleigh Walt, shall accompany you to the end.』

And so, even when outnumbered, they divided the army only to have the enemy breach their encampment and endanger the stronghold.

The Third again.

『My liege, please take flight!』

The King.

『As if I could do that! With my sword in hand, I will cut them down here!』

Third…

『What could you be insinuating!? You are a man essential to Bahnseim, now and evermore. Just leave everything to me. I will surely buy the time for your retreat.』

Saying that, the Third commanded all the troops present to assault, the Bahnseim Kingdom received the time it needed, and after regrouping and reorganizing, they succeeded in encircling and defeating the Remlrandt army.

After taking down the enemy commander, the King.

『This victory… it would never have come to be without dear Sleigh. That man is the true hero of Bahnseim!』

And so on and so forth…

Reading the contents through me, the Third spoke in a low voice.

『… The hell's this? Absolutely disgusting. Just who was it, the bastard that put out this useless mess of a fabrication as if it were the truth? Do they take me for a fool?』

He seemed considerably irritated.

Finishing the book, I turned to Clara.

"What's wrong? From the eyes of a Walt, is that book the truth?"

On her the question, the Third spoke.

『Lyle, tell Clara-chan that this is just too cruel. And wait, if this is supposed to be the official story, then no hits to the face would be enough to make me forgive that incompetent whelp.』

The Fifth spoke?

『Was something wrong? The dialogue aside, it's true you bought time for the retreat, and contributed greatly to victory, correct?』

The Third screamed out.

『It's all wrong! I'll never forgive the sunnavabitch! I mean first of all, the one to take down the commander was me, you know.』

The Fourth spoke.

『Eh? First I'm hearing of it…』

The Third.

『That damn incompetent!!』

(It's rare for the Third to be in such ill spirits.)

I gave Clara my honest impressions.

"… The contents are, well, simply too far from reality."

"They're off? Then I'd be glad to hear the truth handed down through the Walt House. A majority of publications tell the same story."

On her words, the Third let out an enthusiastic shout.

『Give it to her straight, Lyle! Now is the time for the truth to come out!』

(No, I only know the book's story too, you know!)

I tapped the Jewel and let it roll to show my refusal.

『WHYYYY!!』

He seemed quite unsatisfied.

"I'm not that knowledgeable about it. I'll try remembering what I was told, so could you give me some time?"

I said that with a bitter smile, and Clara nodded.

"I'm sure there's information only known to their heirs, and some

contents may be off. I'll be waiting."

She truly seemed happy as she took the book I left on the table in hand.

Reaching for another from her pile of novels, it appears she planned to read them all in the café.

I called to the waiter.

"Excuse me, two refills for tea, please."

I felt bad not ordering anything, so I requested some drinks.

(Well, this isn't a bad feeling. More worthwhile than yesterday's gambling, at least.)

Thinking that, I borrowed another book from her, and began reading.

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Midnight.

The one who dragged me into the Jewel when I was trying to sleep, was the Third Generation who still seemed irritated over the day's events.

I spoke.

"No, I don't think you have to go this far."

There…

『Don't want to! I absolutely don't want to be thought of as having died for that guy's sake! I'm going to show you reality first hand, so make sure you put it to memory!』

His irritation eroded away his usual calm demeanor.

The Fourth was also participating in the discussion, and he looked a little tired.

『Well, perhaps it's best to get it off your chest. Not that I really want to see it.』

It seems the Fourth harbored some mixed feelings.

I mean, the one who prepared the house for its elevation to Baron status, and assisted in various ways was the Third's hated King.

Lead by the Third, the two of us entered his room.

As a Baronet House, the Walt mansion was much wider than during the Second's time.

The furniture and ornaments looked extravagant, but I doubt the Third cared much for them, as they were few in number.

The Fourth spoke.

『How nostalgic.』

A little pissed, the Third…

『You said you aided the House in getting us promoted or something, but look here. Fundamentally, the Baronet Class has better prospects. You get quite a bit of freedom, and after becoming a Baron, you have to do things like look after the surrounding territories, and… it's all nothing but a pain, I tell you!』

It doesn't look like the Third was happy that the Walt House attained Baron Status.

Walking around the mansion, I saw the employees working in good humor.

I…

“In the First’s time, and wait, the Second’s as well… the servants, or how should I put this, well, they all really give off this ‘family’ feeling.”

The Third spoke.

『It’s because we took in widows, and kids without parents from the village, and put them to work here. I hate the stiff and formal stuff, and as long as you tell them to look diligent whenever the guests come, isn’t it all fine?』

The Fourth spoke.

『In my time, those that hadn’t received proper education were… come to think about it, I did have to scold them quite a bit.』

Leaving the mansion, a street came into sight.

There was an open marketplace, and the streets were brimming with energy.

The efforts of the First and Second were finally starting to bear fruit here.

And walking down those crowded streets, the scene began shifting to a battlefield.

The Third was issuing orders atop a horse.

『From here on, we will be stalling the enemy! There’s no need to win. Lock them down, and wait to welcome in our reinforcements!』

He shouted out orders with a clear lack of motivation, and the way his equipment hung on his body truly suited him, is how I would put it.

The villagers the Second had trained moved just as he ordered.

The knights gathered around him looked to be quite a competent assortment.

While looking upon them, the Third moved on and spoke to me.

『After that damn incompetent took power, he just went about picking fight after fight with the neighboring lands. It's a lie that we were the ones being attacked. It's because Bahnseim was relatively vast, and if anyone was ever to try laying hands on it, it would likely be settled with a brief skirmish with local lords.』

The scene changed to a meeting in a large tent.

The with his characteristically red-hair cut short, the king sat on his large chair giving off quite a brazen bearing.

The Third locked his glare on the young man, and spoke.

『… This incompetent, you see, after his enthronement, he said something downright idiotic about wanting to leave his name to history. For a petty reason like that, the wars kept raging on. Whatever he needed to pay, he would compensate with plunder, and distribute the stolen land… That's the kind of man he was.』

The King spoke.

『We must achieve a large victory here, and burn the country that called me a fool, Remlrandt, to the ground! We've already pinned down numerous small wins, but I'm sure this time will be a large battle.』

It was a war where both sides' armies numbered in the tens of thousands.

The Third stood in the council, by the side of the Baron who had control of the land at the time.

The King.

『We'll split the army into five. They'll think our main base will be too short-staffed, and when they break into it, we shall surround them from all sides. Shave down their power here, and the country of Remlrandt has no future! Take whatever you want as compensation!』

Hearing that, the gathered noblemen displayed quite a wide range of expressions.

Some shouting out in great joy.

Some expressionless.

Some clearly reluctant.

The Third Generation explained.

『If they take soldiers from their land and lead them to battle, those soldiers will die. That's their populace they're talking about. Having too many is also a problem, but with all the fighting, we were all quite short of men. I'd already seen off dozens of soldiers to their deaths.』

With only a hundred soldiers to his name, the Third was serving as something of a retainer at the moment.

It seems his ruling Baron did rely on him, as he sought his opinion.

『Sleigh, think we can win this?』

『… He's celebrating too soon. If they concentrate on a point, and manage to actually take our stronghold, it really will be the end for us. And with all the wars going on, the soldiers haven't had the time for actual drilling. There are plenty a lord whose men aren't even equipped to satisfaction.』

After hearing out the Third's premonitions of failure, the Baron spoke.

『My liege. It's dangerous if we leave the stronghold too unguarded. If something is ever to happen to you, then Bahnseim is…』

And the King laughed aloud.

『Hahaha, to savages of that level? You really believe we'll lose, Baron?』

The surrounding eyes gathered on the man, and powerlessly, he…

『No, nothing of the sort…』

And after the battle started, the fortress was thrown into a panic.

A bloodstained messenger arrived at the gate…

『E-even while surrounded, the enemy forces continue on in a straight path to this stronghold…』

『T-that can't be!!』

Standing from his luxurious seat, the king sought confirmation with the messenger time and again.

『They proceed on whilst surrounded!? Why!? By my plan, they should have lost their will to fight by now…』

His surroundings were in chaos, and he knew he had to retreat.

But the argument came that the enemy would only chase them further.

The scariest thing in a war was a fighting retreating.

Shots fired at a fleeing army.

With their backs shown, soldiers and knights would simply be struck down without resistance.

The Third let out a deep sigh, and stood in front of the King.

『Hey.』

『W-what is it… you!』

『I'm Baronet Sleigh Walt… more importantly, just give out your orders already. Isn't this all happening because of your slip up in the first place?』

What insolence to his majesty!

Nobles voicing such opinions were not the minority.

But condemning eyes did begin to fall on his royal highness.

『You all… just who do you think you're…』

As the King tried squeezing out such a voice, the Third smacked him.

(Ah, he used a Skill there.)

Having been smacked by a fist boosted by the First's Skill, the King's eyes turned teary. He leaned on his precious chair, and rubbed his face.

At the same time, the Third…

『As if I care. Did anyone here swear loyalty to a man like you? What I swore myself to was nothing but the seat you lowered yourself into. I swore loyalty to a king with power, but I've no memory of devoting myself to you. And there are plenty who would be happy to take your place.』

The nobles drew their swords.

The king let out a high scream, and those loyal to him drew their blades as well. But they were the minority.

The Third dismissed them with his hand.

『The Walt House will take up the rear. Well, we're only a few tens here, but we'll surely buy the time. Baron, I'll leave the rest to you.』

There, the Baron nodded.

『I understand.』

And the Third spoke while looking down over the King.

『The reason I'm following you here is because of how important the authority you inherited is. If you fall to Remlrandt, then Bahnseim shall be overrun… listen here, I'm not going to risk my life for your sake. I'll only

risk it for my land. So have you finally gotten a grasp of it, my dear incompetent king?』

Saying that, the third exited the tent.

The scene lost its color, and I spoke.

"… I'm surprised the Walt House wasn't destroyed there."

The Fourth held the same opinion.

『Exactly. What's more, he actually treated the house well after that one?』

The Third spoke in an uninterested tone.

『Well it's because I threatened him. And if something were to happen to my land after that, I'm sure the provincial nobles would have rioted… after having his self-confidence crushed here, he became a king quite easy to use by both the feudal and imperial nobles. And after defeating Remlrandt here, we had to go on the offence ourselves. Swapping out kings would be a pain, I'll bet. Perhaps his greatest luck was that he didn't suddenly die an 'unnatural death'?』

Before they could recover their national strength, we would take them over. That dangerous decision was what the Bahnseim Kingdom had made.

The Third spoke.

『There's no justice to it. It's just how many people do you think fell to that man's self-satisfaction? Ah, I'll just add this on, but…』

Giggling a little, the Third explained.

『I used my Skill to put a little suggestion in his head. Whenever he thought about laying hands on the Walt House, he would start seeing nightmares!』

This guy's bad news.

That's what I thought, but it seems everyone around him was the same, so I have no idea what to say.

The Third made a serious face.

『We were already at our limits. The only ones left with any motivation were the imperial nobles, and those that wanted to gain some new land and become nobles. What's more, they stated it was us provincial nobles' obligation to go out, and killed us off like that.』

The Third gave a dark smile as he went on about the high probability of the King's death by unnatural causes.

Thinking over that, perhaps it was precisely the Third's punch that let that man survive the whole ordeal.

The scene changed, and this time the Walt House's forces were projected around.

With his usual demeanor, the Third…

『Just thrust at whatever enemy comes close. So anyone here want to die?』

I was sure no one would volunteer at such words, but a single soldier in the prime of his life stepped forward.

I had seen that face somewhere before.

"Isn't that one of the villagers that mouthed off to the Second?"

The man spoke to the Third.

『… I've caused much trouble to your predecessor. I doubt this will repay much, but let me accompany the young master.』

The Third spoke.

『So you're never going to fix that way of addressing me. Well, so be it… if we lose here, Bahnseim will enter a defensive battle, slowly being

shaved away. Since we've done our fair share of rampaging, I'm sure they won't think twice about plundering us, and just what will become of the women and children.』

There, another stepped up.

It was a young knight.

『M-me too!』

The Third punched the knight off his feet with a smile.

『Well too bad for you! No young'uns allowed. Anyone younger than me has some work to do from now. Freshly weds also rejected. I guess I'll throw in the conditions of, 'forever alone, or a child who can stand already'… 'cuz you're totally going to die if you participate, you know.』

A few soldiers came to the front.

They were all from their late twenties to early forties.

Their numbers were close to forty.

『Yep, looks good. And we're off. I'll leave the rest to you.』

Mounting his horse with light bearing, he took the weapons of the young soldiers, and distributed them to the others. After getting their equipment in order, he urged his steed onward.

The images turned gray, and their time stopped.

The Fourth spoke.

『… That was quite horrendous.』

The Third spoke.

『It really was. That's why I hate that incompetent halfwit. It's not like we wanted to die there, you know. We all wanted to return alive. But… if we lost there, then we'd be the oppressors. From the enemies' eyes,

nothing but terrible folks. We did our worst to them, and then complained we didn't want to lose.』

The Third gazed up at the ash colored sky, and spoke.

『War really is the worst.』

Chapter 5: The Fourth's Memory

I watched the memories flow by in the room the Third had dragged me to.

He usually came off as quite aloof, but I was able to understand why he ended up standing on the battlefield.

With less than fifty soldiers following his lead, the Third launched his attack while using his Skills.

And around him, a few thousand soldiers joined the march… no, rather than that, knights with conspicuous attire began appearing.

And among them, the Third's troops disappeared.

"This is…"

I watched the scene, and the Fourth looked at the ground around them.

『So you were even capable of producing shadows for them?』

The Third pridefully pushed out his chest.

『That's right. This is my Skill… it's final stage: 【Dream】. A skill to show off an illusion of reality. Though it's ability to do actual damage is… nonexistent, perhaps?』

Looking at the Third's face when he said that, I swallowed my spit.

"… In a book I read before, a blindfolded person was made to touch a normal bar of iron, and was convinced he received actual burns, but…"

There, the Third nodded.

『Well that's quite an extreme example there. In truth, there's no guarantee it'll ever succeed. And…』

The Remlrandt soldiers they were fighting began to notice the trickery.

『Oy, these guys are just illusions!』
『There's someone here using a Skill!』
『Where are the injured! The Skillholder should be around there!』

Noticing they were fighting mere phantasms, the knights began regaining their composure.

And within all of that, the Third found their commander and drew his sword.

Leaping off from his horse, the man swung down his sword.

The Third beside me began explaining the scene.

『The First's Skill, and the Second's… I inherited them all. By mouth. They were scared to leave written records. But that ended up backfiring. The enemy was too strong. Even I knew it would be impossible with a single blow.』

The commander who fell off his horse from the Third's attack screamed out.

『What cowardice! You malingering Bahnseim dogs!』

『I won't deny that one, but we can't be losing here!』

While cutting down the elite guards swarming about him, the Third fought with the army's supreme commander.

He would create illusions of himself about him and make sport of his opponent.

I looked around and noticed the source of my own unease.

"The Remlrandt soldiers are…"

The Third spoke.

『Fighting one another, right? That's also a Skill of mine: 【Control】.』

The Fourth put his hand to his face.

『You really are an underhanded one.』

The Third whispered, 'there was no helping it.'

『Unless I used it, we would have lost. I didn't want to have to, but… the battlefield wasn't far from our territory. If the enemy continued on with their momentum, it would all have been taken over.』

So even something like that was covered up by the Bahnseim of the time.

(The fact they all fought for justice was a lie, it seems.)

And as I went through some inevitable sentiment, the situation around began to change.

Allies fell dead one after another.

Their numbers were too different from the start. And having lost the leisure to do so, the Third had stopped producing his illusions.

And the lowered battle axe of the commander sent the Third's right arm flying through the air.

But…

"No, that one's an illusion?"

In an earnest face, the Third.

『And that's yet another way to use it.』

The Third's sword was now deeply embedded in the commander's chest.

The animosity of those around began to gather on him.

Perhaps out of Mana, the Third was swaying on his feet.

All that was left was for him to be killed or taken.

Chaos was beginning to break out in the Remlrandt army that had lost its leader.

At that moment.

『Young master!』

A few bloodstained soldiers ran up to him with a horse. They forcefully lifted him onto it.

『Please be off!』

『… Yeah.』

With a hollow expression, the Third was using the last of his power to conceal their actions. The raining magic fell onto illusory men, and the arrows pierced the same.

And the soldiers that let the Third escape were…

“Why… after being so harsh in the Second’s time…”

They had died while smiling.

The Third spoke.

『Lyle, those men did not die for me. For the land I governed, for their homelands, they threw down their lives. I’m sure they have their personal reasons as well, but the reason I was saved was because it would be best for the territory.』

I thought it was quite a cold opinion. It was only then that the Bahnseim main force began to surround the Remlrandt army.

Witnessing the scene, the Third clenched his fist. He put all his strength into clenching it.

It seems he had yet to find satisfaction with the outcome.

(That's why he hates them so…)

From the front, the force that retreated had managed to regroup, and attacked with cavalry at its center.

Magic came down on the Remlrandt forces, and their formation was too disorderly for them to make any proper moves.

And like that, they were encircled, and assailed with crushing blows.

The scene changed once more, and there was the Walt House's encampment.

It seems that quite some time had passed from the battle.

Lying down, the Third was quite worn away from arrows and magic attacks.

Nobles and the kings entered his tent, and thanked him while he couldn't even give a proper reply.

Seeing his own sickly form, the Third…

『Why can't they just let me rest already. Good grief…』

He seemed quite fed up.

The Fourth was staring at the entrance to the Tent.

And while the Third's final moments were approaching…

『Father!』

A Fourth in his teens curst in.

『… Max… I'm sorry. Really… sorry… here…』

Accepting the blue jewel the Third held out, the Fourth let out rough breaths clenched his fists, and wept. And it all stopped moving.

Everything around was dyed a drab gray, and the Third started to speak.

『I didn't die for anyone's sake. In order to protect my own territory, I made others sacrifices to the best plan I could think up to win the war. It's because I knew it was impossible for the others. The only one capable of cheating their way through was me.』

On the Third's joking tone, the Fourth seemed to want to say something.

The Third spoke.

『Now then, that's where my story ends. You understand it was never anything so simple now, right? And what I wanted to protect… nah, I'll leave it at that. I'm sure you understand it well enough.』

And with those words, I returned to the room with the circular table.

Only me and the Fourth were there.

The Third holed himself in his room, it seems.

The Fourth took off his glasses, and began to wipe them off.

『… Lyle, since we're here, you're seeing my memories as well.』

I couldn't refuse.

"Sure."

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The scene I saw upon entering the Fourth's room was one with the young Fourth receiving the report of the Third being in danger.

A mud-covered and unsteady knight spoke of the Third's attack.

The one crying as he told the tale was the young knight the Third had punched away.

『Sleigh-sama assailed the enemy camp… the difference in numbers is hopeless… I deeply apologize! I truly apologize!』

Dismissing the sobbing knight was a woman in her thirties.

She was probably the Third's wife.

『Go get some rest. That man is really… Max, resolve yourself. Based on how the war goes, the enemies may be coming our way.』

『M-mother?』

Unable to comprehend the situation, the Fourth spoke dumbfounded.

『That's a lie, right? I mean, father always came home just fine. He'd throw out some complaints, and say that he already worked enough for the rest of his life, so someone else should go do it… always…』

The next messenger arrived.

A knight rushed into the mansion, and removed his helmet.

『The Bahnseim army has come out victorious! Sleigh-sama stalled the enemy, and bought enough time for his allies to regain their formation!』

The Third's wife.

『And what about the man himself?』

There, the knight…

『He has returned, but his injuries are severe… I've only been ordered to report the situation.』

And to the Fourth, the wife…

『Max, take your attendants and head to that man at once.』

Just as he was told, the Fourth and those around began preparations to leave.

The scene changed, and the Fourth was galloping out with several knights.

As I watched the Fourth's impatient face, he spoke.

『It was at this moment. The time that my Skill manifested. I just wanted to get there as fast as I could. I just wanted to see my father. With those thoughts on my mind, the Skill came to be.』

Arriving ahead of schedule, he ran over to the Third.

Once that ended, the Fourth changed the scenery again.

It was a road that went on without end.

『The battlefield was quite close by. It really was a bother. And now I can only feel stupid about feeling so in debt to the main cause of all of this.』

"U-um…"

The Fourth corrected the positioning of his glasses with his index finger. They caught the light.

『How about I teach you my next Skill. I'm sure you can master is in no time, Lyle.』

"Y-yes!"

I ended up learning a Skill from the Fourth.

But it wasn't anything all too difficult.

『Well, fundamentally, what comes after raising your own speed, is lowering your opponents, right?』

As the Fourth said that, he showed me by example.

My feet suddenly began to feel heavy.

As if I was moving in water… no, the resistance was greater than that.

『Skill 【Up n' Down】. Control all speed to your will. Drop your enemies, and raise your own. It's simple, but the difference it creates isn't a small one.』

It didn't have the flashiness the Third's showed off, but even so, it was an amazing Skill.

If used in a large-scale battlefield along with the Second's, it was one that would instantly give on the advantage.

"It's amazing."

『… Though not as much as the Third's.』

And I asked something that had been on my mind.

"Um, the Third said something about Skills being handed down by mouth, or something…"

『Yeah, I heard what sort of Skill they were, but the Third died off before he could say the rest… the effective uses of the First's, Second's, and Third's Skills were never handed through the Walt House. But they were quite useful none the less. Didn't have much trouble after that.』

Thinking about that, I realized my luck in being taught the Skills like this.

Skills that should have been lost were revived, and at the same time, I learned the memories behind them.

It all started at that moment.

I'm sure it started in motion when I heard the voices at Zell's house.

After the Fourth finished his explanation of his Skill's uses, he addressed me.

『Lyle, personally, I want you to regain the territory. Because I'm quite attached to it.』

"… That's…"

I found it hard to give an answer, so he went on.

『That's all I have to say for now. It seems the Third just wants you to be free. The Fifth is the same. But me and the Sixth, and the Seventh want you to take inherit the land we loved.』

I was driven out.

As I thought that, he spoke.

『But after seeing the Third's memory, I've done some thinking. You can do whatever you want, but make sure you protect what's important to you.』

"… Yes."

He smiled.

『I see. Well, you've got Novem-chan and everyone else, so I'm sure it'll be hell.』

"That wasn't my will! … Hah, no, it's nothing."

I became sullen, and the Fourth laughed.

And for some strange reason, I began to laugh as well.

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Morning.

Opening my eyes, I felt a light fatigue.

Having seen the Third's and Fourth's memories last night, I was forced to think over things even if I didn't want to.

It wasn't the battle of a heroic tale.

The Third to protect what he had to, the Fourth manifesting a Skill to make it in time for his father's end.

I raised the upper half of my body, stretched, and looked outside.

The sunlight was blinding, and after exiting the bed, I opened the window.

Centralle was noisy. Various voices and the sounds of life rung out.

"Now then, what should I do today?"

I started on the preparations to venture to Beim, but there wasn't anything particularly troublesome about that.

We were also gathering intelligence, but it wasn't anything too dangerous.

What piqued my interest more was the capital itself.

According to Miranda and Shannon, it held a sense of discomfort it hadn't before.

It's nothing I could understand, but the two that lived here could feel something off.

(But Aria didn't say anything in particular… come to think of it, I get the feeling she said she was going out shopping or something today.)

Remembering her plans on shopping, I outfitted myself, and thought to assist her.

Novem was arranging our luggage, and Clara was circling around bookstores today.

To carry out modifications on Porter, Monica was staying over at the warehouse we borrowed.

"I'll have to stop by there as well."

While worrying whether she'd go haywire, I gave a smile.

(Things I want to protect, is it…)

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… A road not far from the Imperial Capital.

There was the form of a worn out group receiving emergency rations from the Walt House's soldiers.

For the sake of the group that followed behind, they were offering up their foodstuffs.

The reason they were so worn out was because a monster attack had claimed a large number of lives.

Many were injured, and a few of them had lost most of their supplies.

Among the merchants, some of them were making pale faces.

Within the midst of that group, Celes walked in a white flowing coat.

With warm-looking clothing, and a smile just as warm, she waved her hands to those around.

"Thank you for saving us."
"It's as if she's a goddess."
"I give my deepest gratitude."

After she went through the trouble of personally stepping out, those around continued voicing words of gratitude.

Celes was in quite a good mood.

Behind her walked a knight in even higher spirits.

It was Alfred.

At his hip hung the dagger she had offered as a reward.

Celes thought.

(Without even knowing why they were attacked, they offer me thanks… it really is an interesting spectacle. It sure does feel good after one does a good thing.)

Receiving thanks, being revered… Celes truly was in a good mood.

She had requested her parents to set a monster on the group trailing behind.

And as the Walt House knights and soldiers rose to fight it, they received the gratitude of all.

She held in her urge to laugh, and stroked the hilt of the rapier at her waist.

No, what she was stroking was the yellow gem portion of it.

To such a good-humored young lass, Alfred called out.

“Celes-sama, it’s time.”

“Already?”

Celes tilted her head slightly in doubt, and a sound like the gulping of spit resounded in the area.

As eyes filled with malice began to fall on Alfred, Celes smiled.

“That’s no good, Alfred. From here on out, the people of Bahnseim are to become my people as well.”

Returning his expression to a serious one, Alfred spoke.

“As expected of the ever compassionate Celes. Now the two of them are waiting for you.”

Celess seemed a little fed up.

“Good grief. Father and mother have their troubles, I see.”

Alfred spoke.

“It’s because it’s an important moment. And the dignified sight of Celes-sama in the imperial court… we are waiting in anticipation.”

Stroking the yellow gem, she smiled…

“Right. I mean… it’s the day Bahnseim will become mine after all.”

Chapter 6: Omen

I was out shopping with Aria, looking at the list and making sure we had everything we needed together.

A majority of what was written was groceries.

Of the equipment we were currently using, we sold off everything that couldn't be used anymore. We brought our clothing to a second-hand store, and were able to trade in old armors or find buyers.

The reason we were able to put in some break days in our information gathering as because of how good of a harvest we got from that last job.

I won't go as far as to say we have no need to work, but we've created some time to sit back and relax.

"Um~ next is camping goods, right… I do believe much of what we have is in shambles."

Aria looked at her memo, and I helped carry her bags.

I didn't think them really necessary, but establishing communication on days like these was important.

And more than anything, I've been able to confirm as of late that communication was my weak point.

That's why I've arranged my time like this.

"Ah, come to think of it… Monica asked me to get her some lumber and tools. She also said to put in an order for nails."

Aria was amazed.

"She can make all of that herself, can't she!? I mean, she started saving up and… to put it bluntly, she's already richer than me."

Monica managed and saved up all the living expenses I gave her. She also got rewards for jobs, and she was much firmer on managing money than Aria.

Because of that, unlike the girl who used money on a regular basis, she was quite a rich one.

"No, you have your equipment to maintain and replace, so… look, that automaton generally doesn't use money in the first place."

All she needed to function… no, even more than that could easily be produced by Monica, and as long as she had the right materials, I'm sure she could accomplish most anything.

But perhaps she didn't have the time, as she put in a request to a smithy.

"Yes, I know that, but I somehow feel that I've lost…"

"Don't go picking fights with automatons in the first place. And wait, how about stopping with those quarrels of yours? I'll just put this out there, but you're not going to win."

Aria was usually quite full of openings, and Monica had a lot of information in her grasp.

From the rotation of her undergarments, to the precise quantity of her secret snackings.

She put a needless effort into her investigations.

(If you think of it like that, Novem and Miranda keep their guards up quite high. Clara has some apathetic parts to her lifestyle, and Shannon's around the same level as Aria.)

And by that logic…

"… So Aria's on Shannon's level."

"What's that!? Revise it this instant!"

Being put on such a level, even Aria was sure to refute.

I promptly went on.

“Y-you both have strangely lovable parts, is what I meant!”

When I gave an excuse, Aria’s face turned a little red, and she walked off.(So did I succeed? Or did I fail?)

While I thought that, the Fourth spoke in a tone that implied he was grinning widely.

『Well you’ve sure grown, haven’t you my boy. If you want my honest opinion, you’re still absolutely no good, but much better than how you started out.』

The Fifth.

『More decent than the start. Look, in the past, you wouldn’t even try to talk about it.』

The chiding voices of the ancestors was something I alone was forced to hear.

I shook my head, and caught up with Aria.

(Was I really that bad?)

While chasing after her, a rumor floated into my ear.

“Hmm, so the high crown prince finally made his choice.”

“And that’s how the cookie crumbles. I feel sorry for the Faunbeux princess, but from my point of view, it was the natural result…”

Some crown prince and princess came up in discussion.

It was irrelevant to me, so I followed Aria’s back.

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When we returned to the inn, Aria took her bags in hand, and went back to her room.

On the first floor, Novem and Miranda were conversing.

What to do for lunch? No, it wasn't a mild topic like that. They were making serious faces.

I called out.

"What's the matter, the both of you?"

There, Novem…

"Ah, Lyle-sama. Good work. No, the truth is…"

What Novem informed me of was the rumor going around Centralle.

Miranda was the one distraught.

"I tried to buy a ticket, but it looks like they'll be sold out for a while. Of all things, I heard an important announcement was about to be made in Centralle."

The reason for Miranda's bewilderment was the the rumor proved to be true.

I recalled the conversation I heard when out shopping.

It was the rumors of prince 【Rufus Bahnseim】, and the foreign princess 【Lianne Faunbeux】.

Novem gave an explanation.

“Accompanied by the breaking of their engagement was his proclamation of announcing a new fiancé shortly. While I do find it plenty odd, that is the direction the capital seems to be headed.”

I guess confusion is only natural.

I mean, I mean, his former fiancé had always been in the Imperial Court.

For over ten years, as a catalyst to build friendly relations with the bordering nation of Faunbeux.

A political marriage to serve as a testament to that.

“… Isn’t it bad to break that up all of a sudden?”

The Fifth spoke.

『In my time, it’d be war within the hour.』

The Seventh too.

『Don’t worry too much. It was exactly the same in my time. It isn’t a sane decision at all.』

The Sixth.

『Did he find a girl he liked, or something? Just mistress her and wife the other.』

The Fourth addressed the Sixth.

『Uwah, simply terrible~.』

Miranda spoke in amazements.

“Of course it’s bad. That’s the stuff wars are made of. But back when I was still in Centralle, I heard they were getting along perfectly. In truth, I was sure the future of both countries was to be stable… at the very least, I can say it was more than just politics going on there.”

It wasn't a loveless political marriage, it seems.

And while he already had an engagement, he broke it off to announce a new one to the state.

I can only think the poor man's lost it.

Novem was curious about another matter.

"… His next partner is the lone child of an influential provincial noble family, apparently. But that alone is quite strange"

A provincial noble's only child.

If they're marrying the crown prince, then they have to be Count Class or above, right?

Was a connection with this house important enough to throw foreign affairs out the window?

The heads of history, Third and up.

『Uwah~ totally not. That one has to be a lie.』

『It's not remotely possible. An only child you say… that means the House dies out right there. Do they plan on having whatever child is born succeed?』

『Perhaps they'll take in a heir from a branch family. But I've little to praise about such a decision.』

『The clouds look quite menacing. Even if both parties were looking for an excuse for war, I get the feeling the playing field is a little too cramped…』

『It does feel like the precursor to a typhoon, and after so long… the First did say it. That the era would be a stormy one.』

That times go into disarray when a monster steps on the stage. Or

perhaps the storm is what wakes the monsters up…

Putting that aside, the situation really is dangerous.

“If things go on like this, it will become difficult to cross borders.”

When I said that, the two of them nodded.

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Past noon.

Finishing lunch, I went out to gather information with Miranda.

Lead along by the girl familiar with the city of Centralle, I wanted to confirm the truth of the matter behind the rumor.

Did the prince really annul his engagement so readily?

If it’s a fabrication, it truly is in bad taste.

Our destination was a stylish café, but in the seat my journey ended, I was forced to pay the fee for the information and expensive tea and sweets of the one before me.

A middle aged woman in service to the palace, and one with long years of service at that.

“Well you’ve brought quite a fine man with you now haven’t you, Lady Miranda. What’s more, your relationship doesn’t seem nearly as artificial as the last. Fine. As you are right now, I’m sure you two will get along fine.”

The woman said that to Miranda as she signaled for her to get on with it.

I thought Miranda would be on the higher standing here, but it seems this woman was her information dealer for all palace-related matters.

"And you're the same as always. So how about you spill the beans… the truth behind the rumor."

The woman raised her cautiousness of her surroundings.

I did the same, but my Skills showed no response.

(No, there are times when the Skill won't be tripped.)

The Sixth did say something along those lines. I remained vigilant as I listened in.

"… It's true. The breaking of the engagement has been set in stone. Lianne-sama has borrowed a mansion in Centralle, and she regularly commutes to the Palace to request a reconsideration, but Rufus-sama's no good. He fell head over a heels for one much younger. What's more, the one on his mind is…"

The woman looked at me and laughed.

The Third spoke.

『… Oh, looks like she knows who you are, Lyle. Quite a competent information dealer you've got there.』

The Fourth.

『Yeah, you sometimes find them. Servants that excel in such matters. I'm sure they're using that knowledge to earn like so.』

"Your boyfriend over there… Lyle Walt's younger sister."

My eyes opened wide, and the sixth let his voice from the Jewel.

『Lyle, don't let it spread to your expression. You're giving that woman a spot of fun. Based on how it goes, she might raise her price because of it.』

I immediately corrected my face, and listened to the woman's story.

"I only saw her from afar, but that's a sort of monster, that one. I've worked in the palace for quite some time, and you included, my dear lady, I've seen enough of those types to distinguish them."

It seems this woman put Miranda into the monster category.

"Well thanks for your kind evaluation… is that what I should say?"

"Hi hi hi! How scary. You're like a spider who'll never let the prey in their eyes wriggle free. You take care, boy."

And after turning to me, she continued her report on Celes.

But her expression was quite earnest.

"Monsters aren't anything rare in the palace. Among the sides that win the wars, are some blessed with enough luck you'd think them blessed by some goddess out there. It's like they possess something beyond the scope of ability. But she stood out even among that monstrous lineup. Everyone to set eyes on that Lady walked into her cage. Those who won't stray may be but yourself and those other beasts up there. Even so, there surely are many stuck her prisoner."

Miranda pried further.

"You mean to say the prince is one of them?"

"The crown prince is a competent one. Well, perhaps I won't go that far, but I doubt there would be a problem with him ruling over the land. But you see… the moment that girl approached, he immediately took to calling the Walt House over. The ministers were the same."

And it doesn't look like the prince was put into the same monster category as Miranda.

I kept quiet, and listened on.

“It’s happening bit by bit, but it feels as if Centralle’s being cast into a nightmare. Right… it feels as if a war is close.”

Recalling the last major war, the woman muttered.

“Come to think of it…”

“What?”

Miranda urged her on, and the woman took a sip of tea as she looked at me.

“… The Walt House was caught up in the last war as well. Truly a troublesome family you have there.”

The Sixth and Seventh within the Jewel, heads at the time, started giving excuses.

『Don’t screw with me! Back then, it was the palace that *got* us caught into it!』

『Exactly! I wanted to return home as much as the next guy, but the court was corrupt and unreliable, or so the current King… when I think back, the Bahnseim Royal Line really have been nothing but a troublesome family for us Walts.』

The Third spoke.

『Totally~.』

The Fifth spoke.

『You all, if you’re saying that much, you did make sure to put them to good use, right?』

And listening to such words, the words, ‘Well, to each his own,’ came to mind.

I didn’t fully latch onto the woman’s words, but decided to take the ancestors as not right all of the time.

As of late, I've come to understand the lifeform known as a Feudal Lord a little better.

They put their own Houses and the maintenance of the territory before all else.

Loyalty and obligation were only abided because they were under the protection of the royal line's authority.

I let out a light sigh.

"Well thanks for that. But I've already been kicked out over here, so I'm largely irrelevant."

Eyes fixed on me, she took another sip of tea.

After draining the cup, she placed it on the counter.

"Now then, I'll be taking my leave here. You've got all the information you wanted, have you not? Also, It's about time for me to retire. If you want information, I'll sell it, but don't think you'll be able to get anything new out of me."

Miranda spoke.

"You're much too young for a retirement, aren't you?"

"The young ones are pouring in one after another. We too much personnel on our hands… just like the scene before a war. Before I get dragged in, I'll have to distance myself from Centralle. That's what my intuition's telling me."

Perhaps she thought it was a joke, as Miranda smiled.

"Hmm… intuition I see."

"Yeah, if I don't run from here, my life's on the line. That sort of hunch. I get it right most of the time."

Saying that, the woman walked away.

I took a swig of my own tea.

Miranda…

“So it looks like the rumor was true. And so, what do you plan to do, Lyle?”

I thought for a moment.

“… That Faunbeux princess is still somewhere in the capital, right?”

Miranda was mildly amazed.

She reached a hand to a sweet, and put it in her mouth.

“You think you’ll actually be able to meet her?”

“I highly doubt it. But I want to know her impression on the matter…”

The Sixth’s voice came from the Jewel.

『If you think to meet her, it’s not like it’s impossible.』

The Seventh too.

『Well, you’re not wrong.』

The Fourth asked their reasons.

『What? Did you build some relation with Faunbeux? Back in my time, it was a far off land with numerous countries in between us.』

The Seventh spoke.

『… As long as you use the Walt house’s name, I’m sure you can meet her.』

The Sixth…

『Because the girl likely resents us all at the moment. And if it's something Celes and the current Walt House perpetuated…』

If we met, I get the feeling I'd be the one in danger.

And wait…

(The Sixth and Seventh… just what did they do to poor Faunbeux?)

For some reason, a shiver raced down my spine.

Chapter 7: Lianne Faunbeux

I paid a visit to a slightly older mansion in Centralle, taking Novem and Monica along.

The time the other party specified was around three in the afternoon.

Arriving a little early, we waited and drank the tea served to us.

The eyes piercing into me and Novem as we sat in the waiting room were quite painful.

I mean…

(Based on the Skills, the Knights, soldiers, and even the servants are red… this isn't good.)

Monica confirmed the tea and snacks didn't contain any poison.

She was pushing out her torso with pride a little more than usual, placing emphasis on her voluminous chest.

Besides the red signal of the knight keeping watch over us occasionally flickering to yellow over time, there wasn't much change going on around us.

(I'm thankful that Monica is able to confirm the existence of hazardous substances, but paying a visit with a maid along is… even when she's already pissed at us to begin with…)

I remembered the events of the day after I sent a letter hoping for a meeting with Lianne Faunbeux.

'Twas the happenings of a few days past.

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Within the Jewel.

Enclosing the round table alongside the ancestors, my face was stiff.

“Couldn’t you have mentioned that a little sooner?”

Rather than fed up… the Walt House, especially the Sixth and Seventh Generations held quite a connection to the country of Faunbeux.

As it was, the Lady’s engagement was destroyed by Celes.

As a man of the same household, it was at a point where I felt like offering an apology.

This body of mine’s not connected to my family anymore. However, I thought I could use the name as an excuse to talk to her.

But the lid came undone, and the Sixth spoke of how it wasn’t Celes alone who tyed the Walts to Faunbeux’s royal line.

『No, there was no helping it back then, or how should I put it… when I dove in, they were already knocking on our doorsteps.』

The Sixth gave an excuse, and the Seventh followed up.

『In my time, they one-sidedly broke a treaty and invaded *us*. But, well… I guess there’s no helping it if they became enraged by the violent bearing of Bahnseim’s corrupt imperials. Yep.』

I was naïve.

I thought that, at most, they had met on the battlefield before, or something along that vein.

During the Sixth’s time, the Walt House had suppressed its surroundings with military might as a Viscount House.

By the large quantity of political marriages carried out by the Fifth, they finally had a reliable repertoire of retainers, so they could go on the offense against the territories that had been harassing them up to that point.

An expanding territory.

The developing Weiss province…

The monarchy of the time had fallen to decay, and they cared not if some House decided to attack the Walts.

There's some speculation to bribery being in play.

And that's why the Sixth did the same, keeping the royalty quiet, and crushing the Houses around.

It was like a warring states era.

That chaos wasn't something simply contained within the country.

Such happenings were rampant in other lands, and the bordering country of Faunbeux was also attacked by nobles of Bahnseim, losing much land.

(Of course they'd get angry at that one. And wait, isn't the Bahnseim Kingdom just terrible? It's getting worse the more I hear of it.)

All the books I read spoke of just how each of the country's actions were backed by justice.

But after opening the lid, I'm scouring to see just where justice is to be found.

"Gaining control of the area around it, the Walt House gained a border with, and encountered the reinforcements sent by the Faunbeux Kingdom. The one to do that was the Sixth. And after a few decades, the one to take down the Faunbeux army when they tried to regain their territory again was the Seventh?"

The Seventh smiled.

『We got quite a bit of land from that one.』

"That wasn't the question! Just what do you expect me to do!? Do you really think I can just go to such a place and say, 'it seems my sister's been causing you some problems this time, I'm sorry!' and end it there? There's no helping it if they try to kill me off!"

To their country, the Walt House is a detestable enemy.

I mean…

『No, I only participated in that war by order of his highness, mind you. Sure, I did manage to take a strategic point or two, but the following negotiations were pushed onto the royals' side. Destroying all the border nobles who'd been doing as they pleased set the score even.』

Hearing the Sixth's excuse, the Fifth spoke.

『… You went too far, fool.』

It wasn't just the Fifth that seemed tired out.

The Fourth was shaking his head.

『Even if you get your hands on some land, don't you think you have the obligation to settle its affairs? Just what were you trying to do, expanding yourself so unreasonably?』

The Sixth.

『I did help the Forxuz House rise, and got them to Baronhood, you know. I had them perform well in the war with Faunbeux. And wait, they were the ones trying to plunder from us, you know… rather than leave them be, wouldn't it be best to get them under control?』

The Seventh.

『After that, the Forxuz House continued their role as out vassals of sorts. I put them to use in my warring days as well.』

After getting my breathing in order, I asked.

“Do you suppose they still remember the Sixth and Seventh on their side? Perhaps they only recognize their loss as to a noble of Bahnseim? Please tell me it’s so!”

As I prayed for that to be the case, the Sixth spoke in an apologetic tone.

『Sorry… the Walt House was the head of the offense that crushed them. It was quite a crushing victory, so I’m sure it remained in the books.』

The Seventh.

『And against those Faunbeuxs rejoicing over regaining their land, a force centered around the Walts beat the hell out of them again. With the Sixth’s time as it was, they were making quite some faces when they heard the Walts brought up once more.』

“You should tell me these sorts of things sooner! With Celes stealing the groom to be, and the ancestors repeatedly beating the hell out of them… just what do you expect me to do!?”

The Fourth contained the discord.

『Well, you’ll at least get to hear about the crown prince, and if you can meet the girl, just meet her why don’t you? If she doesn’t want to, she’ll refuse after all.』

Without a care in the world, the Third spoke.

『Right. At this point, it’s not like saying you’re the abandoned son of the Walt’s will actually let you meet the princess of a country!』

He was chuckling to himself, and those around shared his opinion.

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“Dammit… to hell with not being able to meet. My stomach hurts.”

My gut began to grate at the hostile eyes directed at me.

After sending out a letter, we soon received one designating a time and place in response.

After that day, I could only mull over what to say in apoogy.

“Are you alright, Lyle-sama?”

Novem worried for me, and Monica looked into the tea I had been drinking.

“I’m sure there was nothing hazardous in that one.”

As I was thinking that Monica should really begin to consider her surroundings before speaking, a single woman entered.

Her mouth was smiling, but those violet eyes of hers definitely were not.

It felt as if the lights within them had gone out.

Her deep pink hair was tied into a ponytail, and grown to a length that would even reach her hip.

Her age was either the same as mine, or slightly below.

“Of course there’s been no poison mixed into it. Even if… it’s for the Faunbeux Kingdom’s sworn foe, the Walt House, and their dogs, the Forxuzes.”

(Oh, she provoking the Forxuz House quite naturally there.)

Looking to Novem, I saw her expression hadn’t changed at all. She

was much more courageous than I.

I heard a voice from the Jewel.

In order, Third and up.

『Oh, looks like we're quite hated.』
『Quite deep seated at that.』
『Well, there's at least three things they think they'll have to get back at us for.』
『… The one to give the order was the King.』
『My thoughts exactly.』

The Sixth and Seventh continued to give excuses, so I stood and gave my greetings.

Novem and Monica followed suite.

"Well pardon me. I'd like to give my deepest apologies."

My stomach continued to grate. Her highness, Princess Lianne, sat before us.

After taking a sip of the tea poured by her own maid, she motioned us to sit as well.

"You wrote you wished to speak, right? Did the whelp driven out of his home come to laugh at this abandoned bride to be? Really… the Walt House is nothing but a plague on the royalty of my country."

She laughed to herself a little, but her complexion wasn't good.

She likely hadn't been sleeping enough, as a faint ring had formed under her eyes. It was quite obvious how she had tried to cover it up with makeup.

"… While I have been driven away, I would like to offer an apology in regards to the matter with my sister."

"And for that sake, is there something you'll do for me? Why would

someone without any power such as yourself, attempt to get into contact with me?"

The princess threw away my apology as meaningless, and surely enough, it was without meaning.

I stated my own business.

"Then won't you tell me? It's come to my ears that the city of Centralle has taken a strange turn as of late. From the eyes of the former future queen, does it look that way as well?"

"Well that's quite a broad way to put it."

The princess sipped her tea, let out a sigh, and looked up at the ceiling.

"Five years, or maybe six… around that time, I guess. It was back then I got the feeling Bahnseim was slowly turning strange."

Hearing that, I noticed it overlapped with Celes' own strange turn.

(So it'll soon be the sixth year. In that case, the country has been strange ever since then?)

The First called Celes a monster.

One that could naturally change the state of her surroundings.

"It was just Centralle at first. That detestable girly made her social debut at a ball, only to be pulled around to parties all over the place. Come to think of it, I don't think I've ever seen you before, by the way. Weren't you supposed to be the eldest son of the Walt House, representative of all of Bahnseim?"

She sent a grin at me as if to provoke me.

My hands were shaking.

Hearing Celes's name, I started to realize the world had been moving, even as had been locked away… it was a little scary.

Shunned by my parents, scorned by retainers, my state of confinement floated across my mind.

Novem kindly placed her own hands on mine to quell the tremors.

I looked at her, and she lightly nodded with a smile.

With a feeling of relief, I looked at the princess.

She was observing my and Novem's actions, and perhaps she had found them boring, as she took a long sip of tea.

"… So did places besides Centralle turn strange as well?"

On Novem's question, the princess nodded.

"Correct. Every time I have to make the trip from my own home to here, there are numerous places I have to make stops at. At first, it was nothing but a sense of unease, I guess. It's the truth that I did gradually begin to feel my own existence fade away, but besides that… there was this anxiety I can't begin to express with words. Rufus slowly changed as well."

Within a slowly changing world, I could only sympathize with this person's anxiety.

"… I was the same, you know. Close to six years ago, they gradually stopped looking at me as the House's successor."

Her highness cast her eyes downwards. Her cup was shaking a little.

"I see."

A little bit of light had returned to her lifeless eyes.

"Since I was driven out of the palace, I don't intend to put up some false front. But at this point, I think myself lucky to not be spending my nights there anymore."

Monica was standing by me without the slightest movement.

Novem pressed the princess for further information with a serious expression.

“Is it alright if I ask the reason?”

“You already know, don’t you? That girl called Celes… she’s a considerable beast. The ones in Faunbeux’s court are starting to look cute to me. Humans that you can think of as more beast than man are scattered all over the place if you step through the palace’s doors. But that girl’s another story. I mean, even the knights and servants I brought along with me ended up in her cage.”

The princess went on.

“The guards with me at the moment have gone through a complete personnel swap from the ones I had while I lived in those walls. And I’ve met the girl a number of times. It’s no wonder they become captive to her, is the impression I got.”

It looks like some Faunbeux knights are prisoners to Celes.

What’s more, even while she’s known as a daughter to the Walts.

The knights directing hostility at me must have directed the same malice towards my sister.

But the results are history.

“I’ve formally accepted the annulment of my engagement. I doubt I’ll ever be setting foot on these lands again. As I sympathize with your plight, I’ll offer some advice… It will be for your sake if you flee as quickly as possible. That girl is sure to do something. Something on a national scale.”

‘Though it’s just the ramblings of this pitiful and foolish reject of a bride,’ she added on, as the princess rose to her feet.

Novem and I stood as well.

"… It's likely, this country will go to hell."

Saying that, princess Lianne moved to leave the room.

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On the way back, I spoke to Novem and Monica.

In the city that was beginning to turn dark, I heard lively voices from the bars and restaurants.

It was cold, and I get the feeling my breath was mixed with a tinge of white.

Monica spoke.

"A beast, is it? I am unable to comprehend it. First and foremost, my enemy is you, Novem."

Monica firmly pointed her finger at Novem, and the girl herself addressed me.

"Lyle-sama, did your curiosity subside after talking with the princess? Just what is it exactly that you wanted to find out?"

I looked up at the sky, and spoke.

"No, I just wanted to reaffirm how much a monster that Celes was."

In truth, neither I nor the ancestors understood what it was to be a monster.

I had always been close to her, but I could never get a grasp of the fear I felt for her.

She had always merely been the younger sister I was forever incapable

of winning against.

But as the First had put it, she was a monster great enough to move nations to her whim.

Novem hung her head a little.

“Monster, is it?”

As she said that, Monica also…

“So monsters over beasts… if the Chicken dickhead is saying it, I’ll refer to them as such.”

I spoke to her in an enervated voice.

“Before that, why not revise chicken dickwad?”

Monica, with resolution…

“I don’t want to. If you hate it so much, then I’ll make do with Flying Chicken Dickwad.”

“Anything but that! Do you know how hard I’ve been trying to forget that incident!?”

With the past I wanted to bury dug up, I started into a long verbal brawl with the automaton.

But she seemed to be having quite a bit of fun in our toxic exchange.

No matter how much I talked down to her, she rejoiced. No matter how far she talked down to me, she smiled.

It was the worst.

When I looked at Novem, I saw she was a little worried.

“What’s wrong, Novem?”

“No, it’s nothing, Lyle-sama.”

I noticed that her smile was a little different than usual, but I decided to put it off as just part of my imagination.

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… Centralle’s gate.

It should have been after passing hours, but the doors were held wide open.

The soldiers held back those trying to enter the city.

“I beg of you. If you leave me out on such a cold night, I’ll freeze to death.”

“Not happening! From here on, a very important guest is coming! It’s already passed entry hours, so go to your designated waiting point already!”

Several times over the normal amount of soldiers were present, and some knights rushed out as reinforcements.

A guest desired by Centralle to such an extent…

Lines of knights were stationed to protect an extravagant carriage.

The group that boldly approached the gate passed through it without even dropping pace.

The man watched it pass, and looked at the emblem on the coach.

“The Walt House… even if they’re a Count house, they should at least stop at the gate.”

The man looked at the group trailing behind the Walts.

“Travelers and merchants? So they’re following in behind the Walts. Then I’ll do the same.”

While being vigilant of the guards around, he slipped in.

“With this, I’ll be allowed inside. But what a strange gathering this is. All these thin smiles on everyone’s faces… why do they look so happy and injured all at once?”

That’s what the man thought, but…

As soon as the Walt House’s group entered the city, the gate closed.

The knights didn’t seem to have any intentions of letting the group trailing behind through those doors.

“It’s passed hours. Try again tomorrow morning.”

And with that, the beat up group was shut out.

The man spoke.

“Dammit! Isn’t it fine just to let me pass!? Letting only the Walt House through… this is why I hate nobles.”

There, a voice called out to him.

“Oy, what did you say just now?”

“Huh?”

When he turned around, he found that everyone- children to elderly- was glaring at him.

Their eyes held considerable hostility.

Among them, there was even a man wrapped in bandages, and supporting his build with a stick.

“No, but it’s strange for nobles alone to be let through after hourse, I’m telling you… Centralle’s gate is made so that no one, whoever they be, should be allowed to pass when time’s up, right!?”

A rock was thrown at the man.

The one to throw it looked to be but a child.

“W-what are you…! …!”

Feeling something amiss in his surroundings, the man moved to flee.

But he was surrounded with nowhere to go.

“S-stop. It was all my fault. I’ll apologize.”

His voice made it seem like he would burst to tears at any moment.

But those around him…

“Making a fool of Celes-sama…”
“Putting the Walt House on the same footing as that other noble lot?”
“Our lives’ savior!?”

By the time the man realized the madness surrounding him, it was already too late.

“H-heeeeelp!!”

The man’s scream did absolutely nothing to motivate any of the nearby soldiers run to his aid…

Chapter 8: Fellow Pupil

On the first floor of the inn, Miranda was making a troubled expression.

Nearby, her younger sister Shannon was drinking a juice made of wrung out fruits.

Perhaps the number of customers had risen, as there were more people around them than usual.

Novem, Aria and Clara were getting the luggage in order.

Monica was in the borrowed warehouse, conducting the final tunings on Porter.

I spoke to Miranda.

“Was it impossible to purchase tickets?”

She nodded.

“While the prices did shoot up a bit, the transportation system’s in a bit of a panic, so I’ve been told it’s best to avoid it for a while.”

Reservations were full, and finding an inn was becoming more difficult by the day, or so I’ve heard.

“So we’re stuck in Centralle for a while… I did want us to leave as fast we could.”

Miranda spoke.

“We just came at a bad time. That aside, Shannon?”

“Yes?”

“You should help out a little as well. When everyone’s so busy, why

are you lazily drinking juice in a corner?"

Miranda sounded fed up, but the juice was something Shannon had purchased herself.

She was, for argument's sake, a party member, so she received an equal share in our rewards.

And Miranda took sisterly charge of Shannon's portion.

From that sum, she received enough free spending money to amount to a child's allowance.

"Eh~?"

Shannon made quite a reluctant face, and Miranda lowered her clenched fist.

She tried to avoid it, but Miranda had planned for that, and altered its trajectory ahead of time.

"Ow…"

"Hah, Lyle, you said you were going shopping, right?"

"Eh? Yeah, that's right."

We already had the necessary things assembled, but while shopping around, I could observe the present state of the city.

I hadn't noticed it before, but the residents of Centralle seemed to be looking at the breaking of the engagement in quite a favorable light.

And the fact that Celes was to be the next Queen was quite an essential one to their favor.

By the time I became aware of it, the whole country had already gone amiss.

Even if it wasn't everywhere, the Walt House had repeatedly

conversed with all the influential lords and authority figures.

While I was in my room, the world outside was being changed by my sister's will.

"In that case, get Shannon to carry your bags. She's been doing nothing but laze around as of late, so work her to the bone."

"Lyle, it isn't possible for you to use such a cute and lovable lass as a pack mule, right?"

Shannon made an endearing pose, so I smiled and spoke.

"Of course not. If they were cute, that is. While your outward appearance may fit the terms, your heart's simply awful, so I'll be putting you to full use."

As I said that, Shannon…

"… Didn't you say you'd never let me regret it?"

"Guhah! … You're bringing that up here?"

I heard the Third's voice from within the Jewel.

『Hahaha, that one was a nice one. I simply can't wait for the next.』

The Fourth as well.

『Personally, I don't rank that one too high.』

(T-these guys are…)

I let out a sigh.

"Then just tagging along and walking around outside a bit is fine, isn't it? Now go and ready yourself."

When I said that, Miranda nodded.

“Yes, Shannon, get yourself ready.”

Shannon drained her cup to the last drop, and sluggishly ascended the stairs.

“It’s too cold for anything fun to happen outside.”

Seeing Shannon throw out nothing but complaints, Miranda let out a sigh.

I gave a wry smile.

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Even when it was around noon, my breath was white, and a biting cold pierced my body.

I walked with Shannon, holding her hand so we wouldn’t lose one another.

Shannon spoke.

“Even if you said you’d be shopping, I thought there was nothing left to shop for.”

She was staring at me quite intently, so I covered my face with my right hand.

“Then we can just buy something small. I mean, Aria was circling around all the food carts last I checked.”

“Don’t group me with Aria. Even like this, I’m an ephemeral noble beauty.”

“Former, that is. Look, if you see anything that piques your interest, just tell me. I’ll just be listening in on the idle banter floating around the

area."

While walking, I craned my ears in to the voices of the surrounding city folk.

"Did you hear? It seems Celes-sama's finally arrived in Centralle."

"That's later than scheduled. Is she alright?"

"Come to think of it, there was quite a ruckus at the gate the other day…"

Hearing that, I stopped in my tracks.

Shannon tilted her head.

"What's wrong?"

"N-no… it's nothing. (So my parents are here… and Celes)."

She spoke with a slight strain in her voice.

"Very well. Anyways, buy me that one."

What Shannon was pointing to was a stall that was selling accessories.

Within it, these was a selection of precious metals that all truly seemed quite cheap lined up.

Looking through such a selection, Shannon pointed her finger at a single one.

"This one."

"This? No, it's cheap so I don't really mind, but… wait! Isn't this exactly what your allowance is there for?"

Just as I was about to buy it for her, I noticed.

Shannon did have money on her person.

And as I noticed that, she audibly clicked her tongue.

“Tsk, can’t you treat a girl to this much at least?”

“I’m fine with that, but you should really do something about that personality of yours.”

After I reluctantly paid, Shannon happily put the purchased product in her pocket.

It didn’t look anything great to me, but if Shannon’s that happy with it, then perhaps it’s something special.

Of course…

“Now I can brag to onee-sama. I’ve finally one-upped her.”

… Perhaps there isn’t anything so deep to it.

After distancing ourselves from the stall, I noticed an acquaintance of mine nearby.

The one singing the song filling the area was Eva.

She had finished her piece on the slaying of the Gryphon, and announced it to Centralle.

I came right in time for its conclusion. An applause followed by the sound of metal on metal as small copper and normal copper coins were tossed her way.

“A minstrel? It’s that elf from before, right? Come to think of it, I’ve never properly heard the reading or singing of an actual minstrel before.”

As Shannon said as such, I took her by the hand and headed to Eva’s side.

After her customers happily dispersed, Eva draped a coat over her stage garment.

“Done already?”

She started picking up the coins scattered around.

“Sorry~ the next performer’s coming, so I have to vacate the stage… wait, Lyle? Are you on a date with that girl?”

On her teasing eyes, I gave a sardonic smile.

“Close enough. Shannon says she wants to hear the song of a minstrel. Lend a hand, why don’t you?”

“Ah, you don’t need to worry about those…”

I got down to help collect the change, and deposited them in her tin.

Seeing her can filled to the brim, Eva looked quite delighted.

“Maybe it’s time to find a larger container. But these sorts of trends come with the times, so if the customers stop coming the moment I enlarge it… yeah~.”

While I watched Eva trouble herself, Shannon pulled on my arm.

In quite a demanding fashion.

“Hey, I’ll pay the fee, so can you pick an arbitrary spot and sing? Shannon tagged along on the Gryphon expedition, so if possible, a different song.”

Eva thought for a bit.

“A different song, is it… In that case, the ones that were quite popular until quite recently, of the battle between those foreign countries,【The Two Maiden of the Great War】, 【Holy Woman】… but 【Queen】 is good from a story point of view. For a young girl, perhaps a princess is more appealing than knights and generals.”

Those grandiose names coming out only excited Shannon further.

While watching the elf tire herself out, I spoke.

“For a meal and a song, three large coppers. How does that sound?”

Eva was on favorable terms. She consented with pleasures.

“Great! I’ll do it. Since it’s come to this, I’ll sing it through to the end!”

It seems the terms I put out were quite extraordinary to her.

Shannon was also happy.

Both her arms were flapping, and she gave off an impression younger than her actual age. Perhaps that’s just how high her expectations were.

“Really!? Yay!”

For her to be so excited at hearing the songs of a professional, she really is like a child in those aspects.

“So I’m to give a personal performance to spend the afternoon… as I thought, it was right for me to leave the tribe!”

Was it really right?

As I thought that, the one who had first-hand experience running away from home, the Sixth…

『… In this girl’s case, she’s a dreamer, so it’s fine for now, but I’d appreciate it if she didn’t forget there’s a family back home worrying for her.』

There, the Fifth and Seventh.

『There’s not a fragment of persuasive power when you’re the one to say it.』

『Quite right.』

He didn't say anything further, but it wasn't hard to imagine the Sixth hanging his head.

I looked around, and addressed Eva.

"It seems the next performer is here."

The ones I referred to removed their coats, displaying considerably light garments within this hellish cold.

It looks like they were thematically dressed for winter, but just looking at them made me feel cold.

The three-person group of elves consisted of one singer, and two with instruments.

Eva glared at them.

"Oh my, if it isn't Eva of that bumpkin Nihil something or another."

Flicking back her golden hair, was a female elf clearly trying to provoke her.

"Looking down on me just because you were raised in the city… you're still just a third rate who's never even sung in a shop before! Same as me! Same ground here!"

To her rebuttal, the opponent also…

"It's because guys like you keep flooding in, that getting a gig like that is so hectic! Why not be a little more mindful of your brethren who've chosen to settle down!?"

Looks like elves have their troubles.

I gripped Shannon's impatient hand, and waited for Eva to finish.

"Brethren? You're all just enemies. Enemies I say! And the Nihil are the oldest tribe there is among the elves. I'd like it you didn't look down on

it.”

“It’s exactly that pride of yours that makes me hate you all! Just because you have a few more songs than the rest, you think you’re such hot stuff!?”

“What? Jealous? Oh course, you barely have anything to sing in the first place.”

“Dammmmn you!”

Yep, there’s quite a bit going on with elves. The two male elves behind looked on the verbal brawl with mild amazement.

Noticing us, they came to apologize.

“Sorry. It’s something of a greeting, and it’ll end after a while.”

“Ah, yes.”

“I really am sorry. She had a bit of popularity, but ever since Eva flowed in, there’s been a little of a…”

As they did seem to be honestly troubles, I didn’t offer a complaint.

And like that, I waited for Eva’s quarrel to end, before grabbing a bite to eat.

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The meal ended, and we heard our share of songs. We were returning down the darkening roads of Centralle.

It was a road without much traffic.

Snow had started to fall and build on the ground.

(And in this cold, we finally get snow.)

We tread over the snow as we pressed on.

After the meal, we reserved a number of hours, and Shannon listened to many a poem and song.

She seemed satisfied, but on the other hand, Eva was quite worn out.

“Wow! Today really was fun. Especially that story of those two war maidens glaring at one another.”

The story she spoke of was of the leaders of two small countries.

The rulers took the initiative to lead their armies, and from the sheer violence of the affair, the two of them were feared as the Maidens of War, and Blood Queens, and other names of the sort.

“No, wasn’t that one just too scary? Why do they have to fight so many times every year? It just sounds idiotic.”

They were countries that fought numerous times on their border, and mercenary troupes occasionally went to join in, but looking at the strength of those two most turned back at the quick estimate of their inevitable casualty count.

Eva spoke with a tired expression.

“Well I’m glad you enjoyed it. I’ve only heard the tale, and never seen it in person, but it seems the number of battles has only increased over the past few years. Though the countries had always been at each other’s’ throats.”

Hearing that, the Fifth even…

『… Isn’t it that? Rather than going at it for real every single years, are you sure they aren’t setting up rules beforehand?』

… Began the supposition it was staged.

The one to agree was the Fourth.

『Yeah, there are wars like that. Because killing one another only to get destroyed by external powers once weakened is simply idiotic.』

(So it can go like that. When you think of war, my image of it as a considerable tragedy is the stronger one, though.)

Largely due to the memories of the Third, I'll bet.

Eva looked at me and grinned.

"Those Queens, and the Holy Woman are all the same. It's always the pretty ones, you hear that, Mr. Hero."

I cleared my throat.

In the past, I ended up declaring my wish for Eva to pass down my epic of heroism. While I was in a spot of high tensions due to a Growth, that doesn't change the fact that I can be chided with it.

I tried to change the topic, but Shannon, whose hand I was gripping, suddenly stopped.

"What's wrong?"

"… That can't be… why…"

Her eyes were opened quite wide. Her amber pupils were giving off a golden shine, and in the direction they were pointed, was a knight with four subordinate soldiers.

Seeing the equipment of those men, I could understand it at once.

From within the Jewel, the Seventh…

『Lyle, move at once. They've yet to notice our presence!』

The Third didn't seem to understand it.

『What? What's up? You know them?』

The knight was speaking with a city resident. The resident pointed at us, and received a silver coins from the knight's wallet.

"L-Lyle, that hurts."

It seems I had started gripping her hand too hard. Shannon grimaced, so I let go

"S-sorry. More importantly, we should really vacate the…"

I turned to address Eva, when a voice called out to us.

"Could you wait a moment? We've business with that singer over there. I hear she has a wonderful singing voice. Our lord Celes is intent on hearing of the famed slaying of the Gryphon."

It was quite a kind voice, and the knight it came from was a delicate man with silky long hair.

He approached with a smile, but as per usual, he showed no openings to take advantage of.

The uniforms of this man, as well as his soldiers, was that of the Walt House's.

"Oh?"

HE finally noticed me.

"… You're Lyle, aren't you?"

Alfred Virden's voice lowered, while the soldiers following him raised their guards and began moving to surround us.

The Seventh muttered in a provocative tone.

『Not a single honorific for our Lyle? My how high and mighty

you've gotten, brat of the Virdens.♩

I stood in front of him as if to protect the two girls.

"It sure has been a while. Is that what I should be saying here? I really didn't think we'd be meeting here, mind you."

In truth, I was well aware of the rumors of Celes and her movements. That's why I purposefully gathered information in places I wouldn't get to meet her.

(My Skills can't identify personal identity. I never thought these guys would come out here.)

Those around had wide grins on their faces.

The soldiers weren't Alfreds, but ones of the Walt House.

"The washout failure of the Walt's is pulling around two woman in a secluded place like this? What's more, an elf and a young… hm? Aren't you Shannon of the Circry house?"

It appears that Alfred knew about Shannon.

The girl hid herself behind me.

"W-who are you lot!?"

As Eva yelled out at the soldiers surrounding us, Alfred breathed out a sigh.

"So you're Lyle's woman. Well that's interesting in itself, I guess. I'm sure Celes-sama would praise me for it. The main issue at hand is how to get you to come along, it seems."

Perhaps he thought himself the absolute strongest here, as Alfred went on with considerable extravagance.

And it's true that I only had a portable dagger on me at the moment.

Not reliable enough to handle these numbers.

The Sixth let out a voice.

『Men of the Walt House? They sure seem arrogant.』

The Fifth was displeased as well.

『How lamentable. Back then, I'm sure I taught them to observe everything from below, and crawl and struggle to the highest point…』

Fed up, the Third addressed the Fifth.

『If everyone had power, perhaps that's how it would be. But this child's a Virden, I see.』

The Fourth sounded angry.

『The parasitic house that put us through hell and back. The virdens.』

The Seventh spoke.

『Lyle, do it! We'll permit it!』

(I don't think it's a problem of permission, but… it doesn't look like they'll let us pass.)

By the look of things, Alfred wanted to shame me. What's more, as he proclaimed it as something for Celes' sake, I couldn't accept it personally.

He was once a senior disciple of mine, but I'm sure I can bring myself to hate him.

"Immobilizing him and taking them both sounds nice too. Or perhaps before his very eyes…"

While lost in his own fantasies, Alfren drew the sabre at his waist.

But what I was watching wasn't the blade in his hands.

"… Oy."

"Huh?"

Alfred sounded clearly displeased that I interrupted his conversation with himself.

But that was irrelevant to me.

What I wanted to know about was the dagger hung at the man's belt.

It was one I was familiar with, and not something that should be in his hands.

"Where did you obtain that dagger?"

"This? It's something Celes-sama bestowed on me as a reward. Jealous? Unlike a washout like you, I'm blessed with splendid…"

"Not that. I mean where did Celes get it?"

Even when I started glaring at Alfred, the surrounding soldiers did not react. But the moment I blurted out my sister's name without an honorific, they all pulled their swords at once.

I could see some considerable training behind their movements. The quality of these soldiers really was different.

"… Add on a –sama, trash. For one like you, being left alive was more compassion than you deserve! You can't imagine how much hatred flows through these veins simply knowing you carry the same blood as her's."

"… Yeah, no I don't really care. What you think of me doesn't really matter. It's just that the dagger over there is something my friend had on him. Where did she get it!?"

When I yelled out, my anger seemed to put Alfred in a better mood.

"Those three blockheaded adventurers, you mean? They refused

Celes-sama's invitation, and received the blessing of being dealt with her personally. It's a dagger that became Celes-sama's at that point in time. I'm sure this blade is more honored in my hands than in the service of those worthless fools!"

Shannon trembled on the laughs of Alfred and his men.

And Eva…

"Hey, these men are strange in the head. If we don't run, then…"

Alfred's expression turned severe, as he turned to Eva and spoke.

His attitude, his voice was completely different from when he first called out to her.

"When Celes-smam is gracing you to let you play your tunes for her ears, you turn to run? A mere elf thinks to turn against her? … Cut off her limbs. Even without them, her voice should come out."

"Yes!"

The soldiers approached, and I snapped my fingers.

A box contained in a magic circle emerged in the ground, opened on its own, and shot out a sabre.

After that sword came into my hand, the box and circle vanished altogether.

On the approaching soldiers, I used a Skill.

"… Up n' Down."

The Fourth's Skill caused all of them to lose the sharpness in their movements. But even so, they continued closing in to carry out the orders given.

From within the Jewel, the Fourth issued out orders.

『They sure are trained. Also, using Skills didn't fluster them in the slightest. For them to be so proficient, 'tis a pity. Lyle, if the opponent is too strong, these sorts of Skills won't have too much an effect, or they'll be able to arbitrarily cancel it out at some point. Don't let your guard down… of course…』

I raised my left hand, and used magic.

"Lightning!"

An electric discharged assailed the assailants, making them collapse to the ground. The output wasn't that high, and I doubt their lives were in too much danger.

『… When it comes to ability, at least, Lyle's the better, but…』

With the soldiers incapacitated, I heard some screams from my surroundings.

While it may have been a relatively deserted street, it looks like we've been spotted.

"Okay, Eva, take Shannon and…!"

I blocked an attack with my sabre.

The one repeatedly thrusting at me with a sabre of his own was Alfred.

"I felt that one a little, Lyle. Using magic against your senior swordsman, do you not find it the underhanded tricks of a coward?"

I repelled his assault, took some distance, and fixed my stance.

Alfred learned under the same teachings as me, and would make an annoying opponent to take down.

Behind me, Eva was clutching onto Shannon.

I wanted to let them escape, but despite my magic, the Soldiers were

already on their feet.

Eyes locked on me, about to slash.

Alfred spoke.

“You lot, I’ll hold down Lyle. Get the other two.”

The Soldiers sprung to action, and I tried to protect the two, but Alfred shot a thrust.

Retreating a step, I turned half my body to avoid it, swinging at him horizontally.

Intercepting my blade, he loosed a kick at me.

I took the blow, using it to move backwards, and cut one of the soldiers approaching Shannon and Eva.

However, my attack was only to be blocked, with its target taking distance.

The Third sighed.

『… Lyle, you’re no longer in a situation where you can hold back. You’re at a numerical advantage at that. If you continue going at it as you are, Shannon-chan and Eva-chan’ll die, you know.』

The Fifth agreed.

『Resolve yourself. Also, get the hell out of there already.』

(I know that.)

I clenched the Jewel, and got into position again.

Alfred watched my movements and narrowed his eyes.

“This boy’s better than I thought.”

On the soldier's words, he gave out an order in an amused tone.

"Then we'll crush Lyle first. Celes-sama is waiting expectantly for that elf's song. If we waste any more time, then Celes-sama will succumb to boredom."

And for that sake alone, the men swung their swords at my neck. Seeing their plight was enough to make my head hurt.

And at the same time…

"I'll have you return that dagger."

I decided to reclaim Rondo-san's dagger from their bodies.

All while both my fear and anger for Celes rose in level.

Chapter 9: Reunion

In a scene of piling snow, I held up my sabre to strike.

I made sure to watch the movements of all five enemies, but even with their movements dulled by my Skill, they showed no signs of retreat.

More than that…

“A support Skill, huh. How wonderfully plain. Perfect for you, isn’t it Lyle?”

One with an annoying grin stood in a stance similar to mine.

Our foundation was the same.

While exhaling a white breathe, I used Skills to confirm my surroundings.

Who was going to attack when, and where everyone was aiming.

If I wanted to concentrate on my own battle, I had to keep myself in a position to be able to protect Shannon and Eva at any moment.

I thought I would easily be able to incapacitate the enemy, but it looks like that view was naïve.

(For the Walt House’s knights and soldiers to be this troubling…)

Keeping close watch of my footwork, and even throwing in some feints, the soldiers were making serious expressions.

They were tough enough to get to their feet promptly after a blow from my magic.

The Fifth issued some orders to me.

『But killing them here will cause some trouble down the road. If

possible, you should avoid it, but… I never would have thought you'd run into them at a place like this. What's more, they're being quite aggressive at that. Lyle, hold back and they'll stab at all your vitals. Fight with the intent to kill as well.』

If I kill, I'll definitely be fanning the flames.

I was more than prepared to be mocked or scorned, but in all honesty, I never thought it would be Alfred that I'd run into.

The Third spoke.

『To have the Walt House's soldiers- trained for generation after generation- as your enemies, this is going to be a pain.』

A soldier right behind me advanced, so I reacted.

Using that opportunity, Alfred stepped in.

His consecutive thrusts aimed at my vital points had gained a sharpness they hadn't had before.

I repelled those with my sword, sensed the soldier cutting at me from behind with the Second's Skill, continued retreating backwards, used my left hand to pull the dagger at my waist, and stabbed back without turning my head.

What I hit was his thigh.

I stuck it in quite deep, and he raised a groan. With that momentum, I slammed my right elbow into his face.

Since my body was left quite open after that move, Alfred tried coming at me again, so I scooped up some snow on my boot, and kicked it up to steal his vision.

His attack fell slightly off his mark, letting me parry it with my dagger.

Motioning to the other Soldiers, Alfred retreated a distance, letting me

put an incantation to mouth.

“So in the end, I’m still using magic. Fire Bullet!”

While it wasn’t a powerful spell, its almost-instantaneous usability let me bombard the area. They were aimed with the Second’s Skill, so they hit without fail.

The soldiers burst into flames on contact, but through rolling in the snow, they recovered and stood at once.

One of them collapsed with blood streaming down his thigh.

Only the fireball aimed at Alfred came short of hitting him.

It dissipated right in front of his face.

(What? It’s as if it was crushed to pieces.)

And of that fact, Alfred sounded quite amused.

“So you’ve made one man drop out. And let me praise you on your use of Skills. It looks like your brainless sword strokes aren’t the only thing to you.”

Brandishing his sabre, he fixed his posture.

The collapsed one held down his leg, wrapped a cloth around it, and started crawling away to perform emergency procedures.

Based on the density of the stains he left, it will be nigh impossible for him to aid the battle anymore.

(But I need to keep mindful of him.)

Behind, Shannon.

“We have to run! Lyle, we have to get away ASAP!”

“Yes, I know that!”

When I yelled out, two soldiers cut at me. The remaining one headed off to help his fallen comrade, and I threw the dagger.

It stabbed deeply into one of their right shoulders, and I used my sabre to cut at the other's arm.

The Sixth cried out.

『Lyle, get serious!』

When I jumped in shock, a sudden sensation as if my right arm had been grasped…

"What!?"

I tried to free myself, but its grip was too strong.

With the Second's Skill, I could sense something definitely tangled around it.

And Alfred cut in.

I immediately kicked, sending all my might into his stomach.

His mouth opened, and saliva shot out.

"B-bastard!"

My leg was grasped, and perhaps since the range was too short for a sabre to be effective, he drew the dagger at his waist.

"I was waiting for this."

Since he had my leg grasped quite nicely, I kicked off with my still-grounded leg to deliver an impact to his chin.

The gripping sensation around my arm disappeared, and after sprawling in the air for a moment, I landed.

I collected the fallen dagger with my left hand, and found myself overlooking a fallen Alfred with blood coming down from his nose.

Seeing the dagger gripped in my hand, Alfred screamed.

“G-give it back! That’s something Celes-sama bestowed upon me! Don’t touch it, cur!”

“This isn’t something for you to hold.”

After kicking Alfred’s dropped Sabre a ways away, I sent a glare to the soldier treating his wounded comrade.

He was looking at me with mortified eyes. The injured one was the same.

They definitely hadn’t lost the will to fight.

There, Shannon yelled.

“Lyle, that guy has lots of hands! It’s a Skill! There are Four growing from his back!”

On her words, I looked at Alfred.

While she said something about hands, he got to his feet quite normally. But even when there wasn’t anything touching the ground, it was pressed down… no, a mark as if a hand was pushing against it formed.

Perhaps twice the size of a normal person’s, it was surely bigger than that of anyone’s present.

The Fourth spoke.

『Invisible hands, something like that? So he’s a Skill holder.』

The Seventh also seemed to remember.

『Come to think of it I do remember some strange Skills surfacing in that Virden house. Did they find the need to have such a things… oh right,

they were an underground organization. I'm sure invisible hands would prove essential in… various circumstances.』

In trickery, or perhaps assassination… it was a Skill that looked to be useful for plenty of dirty jobs.

While holding his left hand over his face, He extended his right hand to the side.

The fallen sabre leisurely rose into the air, and returned to that hand.

Shannon shook, and…

"That guy has four arms coming from his back, he's controlling them at will…"

While I couldn't see anything, Shannon seemed certain.

Alfred looked at her, and…

"Are your eyes special? Then I must report to Celes-sama… but I'll be going to her with your head, Lyle. I'll mince it, crush the bones…"

The eyes Alfred sent at me were already corroded.

In the past…

When he was my senior disciple.

At the start, he was a kind and strong man.

He would call out to me in good humor, and teach me various things.

But now all he gave off was an unsightly smirk.

"Celes… was it Celes who did this to you!?"

His invisible hands answered the feelings I shouted out.

They didn't send stimulus to my eyes, but I was also a Skill holder.

The Second's Skill showed me his movements.

The masses of Mana I could only vaguely catch glimpses of started being perceived as arms to me after hearing Shannon's advice.

The falling snow was brushed away by those unperceivable appendages.

But…

"Once you understand the trick, it becomes quite simple… Earth Hand!"

Brown arms extended from beneath the snow, and began grappling with the ones Alfred produced.

With a grating sound ringing out, Alfred seemed to be in pain.

"You… Washout!!"

Running between the gaps in the Earth Hand and his own, I thrust my Sabre at his heart.

But…

"Lyle, they're protecting his body too!"

As Shannon said that, I parted from my Sabre, and jumped back.

Sent off its trajectory, the blade stuck into his left arm, and blood started to flow.

A little squeamishly, Shannon started to explain just what was going on with the man's body.

"Countless arms are sprouting inside his body, protecting it like armor. What's more, they're wriggling left and right, and the fingers are squirming like…"

Hearing that, Eva.

“What’s with that… disgusting.”

My impression was the same.

Soon after contacting his flesh, my Sabre pulled itself out, and started floating in the air.

“I-it’s heavy. You were fighting with something like this?”

He thought to use it, but as it was heavier than he expected, he ended up discarding it.

The Third sounded satisfied.

『Doesn’t look like he gets too much power out of those bad boys. All Skills can be troublesome, but rather than battle, I think this one’s more fit for cheating the card tables. Or maybe theft?』

The Fifth too.

『No skillfulness. No power. While I think he’s gotten more than one stage to it, if you know the base ability, that’s all there is to it.』

It would be scary if I didn’t know its identity, but this is thanks to Shannon’s aide.

At the same time, a countermeasure surfaced in my mind.

The situation was beginning to favor me.

Alfred was incessantly glancing at the dagger, and unable to concentrate. I’m sure he was frantically formulating ways to reclaim it.

(Would I be like that if the Jewel was taken?)

Just as I thought to blow him to smithereens with magic, a single carriage came to a halt a little further down the road.

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… Novem worried for Lyle's late return.

She had waited a while on the inn's first floor, but there were no signs of him coming back anytime soon.

"He's late. It's almost time for dinner."

As Novem sighed with her hand to her face, Aria chewed on a beefsteak as she spoke in a tired tone,

"He's not a child. He'll be back sooner or later."

At the same table, sitting across from her, Miranda watched Aria and sighed.

"Don't you ever get tired of eating the same thing over and over again? Also, show a bit of worry while you're at it. Lyle's family is also in the Imperial Capital, it seems."

Aria spoke with pride.

"I'm merely a maiden on a quest to find the world's best beefsteak. Also, I'm sure he's avoiding all places he's likely to meet them. They're not the class of people you'd be able to encounter at will, right?"

Monica was nearby, standing rather than seated.

Perhaps unpleased with Aria's attitude, she quietly…

"Already +2kg from when we first met, I see."

Aria locked eyes with her, before playing dumb.

Clara looked up from her book at Monica.

“You really are amazing, Monica-san. How did you manage to calculate her body mass?”

Monica went into an in depth explanation, but Aria angrily dismissed it all as rubbish.

As Novem continued to wait for Lyle’s return, a person entered the inn.

“Well I’ll be damned~ That was quite a bout.”

The one to voice such lamentations went up to the desk, and handed some money to the inn’s owner. He seemed to be a regular, as the owner dealt with him in quite a casual manner.

“What happened?”

“A fight. Fight. A knight and adventurer were cutting at one another, five on one and all. Quite rowdy…”

Novem stood, and briskly closed in on the customer.

“Pardon my rudeness. Could you tell me where said matter did occur?”

The customer was male, and he retreated a few steps on Novem’s approach.

Rather than scary, her serious expression and aura were overwhelming.

“Not on the main street, a side one. A place with a lot of performers, and I do find it a wonder a fight brawl broke out in such a place, but… they your friends?”

After hearing that, Novem ran off.

She sprinted out the inn’s door, and Aria and co followed in confusion…

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The snow kept coming down.

In a white and flowing coat, Celes tread over the land to stand before me.

The Skills that had come into my hands put me on my highest possible guard.

With my ancestors' Skills in my hands, I could finally begin to see the girl's abnormality.

Behind me, Eva, and the trembling Shannon she held in her hands, seemed to understand it as well.

"Who are you…"

When I took a stance with the dagger, I perceived the shaking of my own body.

It wouldn't stop.

I was able to understand the existence known as Celes to a greater extent than before. But through that, a fear even greater than what I felt back then started to sprout.

Eva muttered.

"That's no human. What, just what does this…"

After stroking her lovely golden hair, Celes spoke in the sad tone of an actor reading out the script of a tragedy.

"You've finally reunited with your dear sister. Don't you think such

wonder is uncalled for? How sorrowful. Truly tragic… and when I brought myself here upon hearing I might find the famous elf of rumor, for me to meet the one driven from my own home. You survived? Just die already."

Those final parts were accompanied by stifled laughter, and she suggested my demise with lovely serenity.

Alfred and his knights hurriedly gathered at her feet.

Despite their injuries, they went to her side as if their lives depended on it. The knights already accompanying her glared at them.

"Can you not even carry out your jobs to satisfaction, you disgraces of the Walt name!?"

A knight once well respected as a retainer to the house was now throwing out his jeers at the bleeding men.

The Seventh looked at Celes.

『What the hell? That's supposed to be Celes… that's a completely different person, isn't it!?』

The Third saw her and lost his usual composure.

『Lyle, can you use your Skills to get the hell away from this general location as fast as physically possible? Take the two, and take flight at once.』

The past.

To rid herself of me, she challenged me to a dual.

Now I've gone through three Growths, and compared to back then, both my physical and magical states have improved greatly. But still, the image of me coming out on top has yet to surface in my mind.

Of smaller build than me, and oh so delicate.

Her slender arms, legs, neck, they all looked as if they'd break if not

handles with the proper care.

Her innocent smile was missing a little of the childishness it held before.

After tracing the shape of her lips with a finger, she touched that finger to Alfred's lips.

That gesture was quite a mature one, and I couldn't think her only two years my junior.

After experiencing the world outside, I understood.

That Celes couldn't be human…

And with a smile, she spoke to Alfred.

"Alfred, thank you for all your service."

"Celes-sama, I am… eh?"

Shannon let off a slight scream, and Eva averted her eyes.

I couldn't tell when she had drawn it, but at some point, the rapier with a yellow gem embedded in its hilt had found its way to her hand.

Alfred fell forward onto the ground. The rapier was stained with blood.

And the ground around the fallen knight began to turn red as well.

Alfred's face turned in my direction, but it was as if he didn't see me at all. He merely searched the scene for Celes' figure, and smiled.

Slowly, she lifted up the rapier.

"Wipe it off."

"At once."

The knights wiped off the blood sticking to the rapier, and not a single one of them turned an eye to Alfred.

Even the injured soldiers only had eyes for her.

Smiling, Celes…

“Yeah~, today you had that thing over there as your opponent, so I’ll let you all off without killing you. That’s why you’ve got to give it your all for me next time.”

“Yes!”
“Even if it costs this life of mine!”
“Celes-sama!”
“… C-Celes-s-sama.”

The soldier whose thigh I had stabbed was looking at Celes with a pained expression.

There…

“Oh my, your face is quite pale. Are you in pain… there.”

After gently extending her left hand to the wounded man, the swift sound of a snapping bone resounded in the area.

His neck broken, the soldier was making a peaceful face.

Looking around, I saw a number of onlookers had gathered.

But each and every one of them had been entranced by her charms.

“Why…”

The Fourth spoke to me.

『Lyle, *that* is your sister? That’s really your sister?』

The Sixth was the same.

『The Monster the First spoke of… it seems we truly had failed to grasp the meaning of the word. That one is much too dangerous.』

The Ancestors rarely showed any weakness, but seeing Celes, their senses of crisis acted up. All they could do was urge me to escape.

The Fifth cried out.

『It's coming! Don't go astray!』

In the next instant, Celes was right by my side, looking up at my face.

When I tried to take some distance, she stepped on my foot.

Chills were racing up and down my spine like crazy.

"Hm~ Perhaps you've gotten a little stronger? And eight Skills at that… how interesting. Though your Jewel is of much lower quality than mine. A good-for-nothing Jewel perfect for a good-for-nothing."

Low quality. Having been told that, I glared at her.

She's taking me for a fool.

And at the same time…

(She can gauge the number of Skills? What's more, 'good-for-nothing,' she says!?)

All I've piled up… what the ancestors passed on and left me, she's taking all of it as useless.

Celes's eyebrows twitched a little in response.

"Oh, you're angry? As I thought, I hate you. You look at me without becoming captive… ah, I believe that child over there is…"

It seems that Shannon was of greater interest to her than I. She immediately moved to her side, grabbed her hair, and tossed Eva aside.

“Kyah!”

Grabbed by the chin and hoisted up, Shannon thrashed around to try and resist.

“Let me go! Unhand me already!”

Celes smiled.

“How cold. Even when you called out to me so frantically last we met. Of course, now you’re able to get a better look of me. Have you grown a bit? Ah, right, right! Do you happen to know where your sister is? The pretty one. I always wanted an older sister like that. But right now, your eyes are quite interesting as well… give them to me.”

“N-no, NOOOO!!”

On Shannon’s scream, I instinctively extended my hand to Celes.

She chucked Shannon at me, knocking me off my feet.

Watching the two of us tangled up, Celes laughed to herself.

And she put her foot above the fallen Eva’s head.

“L-let me go…”

It didn’t look like she was putting in much pressure, but Eva who was of larger build than her was struggling for her life to get free.

“Your voice isn’t nearly as pretty as I’ve heard. Isn’t mine the nicer one?”

When she said that, the surrounding knights and soldiers voiced their affirmation.

“Yes, Celes-sama’s voice is much more splendid than that barbaric elf over there.”
“There’s not even a comparison to me made.”
“Hearing your voice alone makes me glad I became a knight.”

She put her hand to her mouth.

“I see. Thank you. Well, then I guess I don’t need this one either.”

Saying that, she kicked Eva in my direction.

Eva raised some pained moans. Her arm was severely inflamed.

“You… just what do you want? What right do you think you have to carry out such acts!?”

Leaving the two girls on the ground, I stood.

I felt malice-filled eyes fall on me from all directions, but Celes herself merely played with the tips of her hair, and lost herself in thought for a short while.

For one brief moment, her eyes fell on the Yellow gem.

“Right, or how should I put this… it’s because I’ve already inherited all of those. I doubt you’d understand. Right, I’m sure you’re unable to comprehend it.”

Receiving her eyes of hate, I took up a stance.

Rather than yellow, looking at the rapier with the Golden Jewel embedded in it, the Seventh spoke.

『The gem… hey, that’s Zenoire’s. She stole my wife’s Jewel! What is the meaning of this!? That was locked under maximum security! I didn’t even *tell* Maizel about that one!』

The Seventh flew into a fit, but anyways, that means my grandma was the holder of that Jewel.

I remembered the words the Seventh once imparted to me.

The beautiful courtesan Agrissa… the descendants of the ones to bring ruin to the country three hundred years ago. That was the tribe grandmother

Zenoire hailed from.

"Grandmother's Jewel…"

When I muttered that, Celes' face twitched.

"You knew of it? It's just as I thought. That's why I hate…"

After she raised her hung head, she turned to the blue Jewel hanging on my neck.

"Even so, the blue gem is Grandpa's, right? Where'd you steal it from? Well, even if it was lying around, no one would have used it anyways. Ah, but… there was that old codger, wasn't there?"

Hearing those words, I recalled Zell, the one who saved me.

Seeing my reaction, Celes spoke on with intrigue.

"He's already dead, mind you. It was in the way, so we cremated him, hut and all."

I decided to put everything I had to full use.

Chapter 10: Celes' Ability

"He's already dead, mind you. It was in the way, so we cremated him, hut and all."

The snow covered, usually-deserted road had amassed numerous onlookers on both end.

They were all watching Celes, and not a soul moved to put a stop to this farce.

And I…

"Zell was my life's savior!"

I glared at her.

My body was unable to move from fear, but I somehow managed to work myself up.

After I gripped the Jewel, I heard the Fifth's voice from within.

『Lyle, run with all you've got! Don't you dare fight!』

They all screamed at me to avoid any battle. To run away.

It's the first time anything like this had ever happened.

They had happily egged me on to fight the Gryphon, and were determining Celes' threat level as far, far higher.

The Seventh.

『Lyle, I thought of that as nothing but a yellow Gem. But Celes called it a Jewel. If it's to have gained an existence to impart its Skills like us, then it would have to be…』

Celes could surely make use of multiple Skills.

But at the same time, I thought.

(I can't just leave her rampant!)

Having ventured into the world outside, I became able to comprehend Celes' irregularity.

My younger sister… if I left her be here, it would surely bite me down the road.

I pulled at the Jewel as if to tear it from my neck. The chain it hung from wrapped around my arm, forming the shape of the giant sword.

Celes looked on it with some intrigue.

The surrounding knights and oldiers put their hands to their weapons, but Celes chuckled and took charge.

"Don't get in the way of my fun."

Great sword in my right hand, and dagger in my left. The ancestors called to stop me.

The Third in a panic.

『Lyle, get the hell away already. That's something you should never fight!』

The Fourth tried to persuade me.

『Swallow those feelings for now. She seem a whimsical one, so grovel or do whatever it takes to make it through this alive!』

The Fifth was the same.

『This instant is enough. Just stomach it for this very moment!』

The Sixth yelled at me.

『Just look who you're pointing your blade at! You can't match up!』

The Seventh as well.

『Lyle, that is not your sister Celes. It's a monster. An opponent where your defeat can't be helped! Now choose the path that leads to your own survival!』

I took a quick glance at Eva on the ground with her broken arm.

Shannon's entire body was in pain from being thrown.

"… I don't want to."

The Third was…

『Lyle…』

"Fearing and trembling at that girl… having her speak ill of all I've ever obtained, even if I survived, I would never be able to forgive myself."

Before my eyes, Celes gave a broad grin.

It was an unsightly smile made to scorn an enemy, but I couldn't help but feel a strange fascination for it.

"And who might you be talking to? There seems to be seven people worth of memories in that… ah, could it be the past heads? To have chosen a failure like you, I'm sure they must be regretting it quite a bit. But…"

Before she could go on, I took a large step forward.

"… If they're of the caliber to have chosen such a failure in the first place, they can't be anything special themselves."

The sword I could barely even lift in both hands before could now be swung around in one. Because of the Skills imbued in my body, it felt extremely light.

【Full Burst】strengthened my body several times over.

【Field】 and 【Select】 let me confirm the surrounding situation, and lock onto her.
【Up n' Down】 raised my own speed, while lowering hers.
【Dimension】 gave me a three dimensional grasp of the terrain.
【Spec】 told me wherever she was, and what state she was in.

Using six Skills at once, I cut at her.

But Celes smiled.

She curved her lips, and stopped the giant hunk of a blade with her slender rapier.

"How interesting. So it becomes a weapon… hmm, so rare metal can be used like that… seriously, is that really it?"

She posed a question to herself, and acted as if she answered the question by herself as well.

But I could understand that action.

"How many!?"

"What's up?"

"How many memories are recorded in that Jewel!?"

I pushed power onto the blade as if to crush her.

The snow on the ground was pressed down, but Celes herself didn't move at all. When I tried cutting at her with the dagger, she had already grasped its blade.

"Guh!"

She didn't even think to answer the question I posed. Not that I thought she'd tell the truth either.

I just thought it would serve a slight diversion.

Rather than unflustered, it seems her perception of me as an opponent reduced.

“Hmm~ so you can’t tell. As I thought, those ancestors are nothing special.”

I pulled back the dagger, and returned it to its sheath.

Using both my hands, I cut down with the greatsword, putting in more power. She didn’t care in the slightest.

“Your power increased. Speed as well. I think it’s a little harder for me to move? But is that all? Also, you seem to be misunderstanding something, but…”

I jumped back to try and take some distance from her.

But Celes stepped in, maintaining the same positioning from me as before. This time, she started pushing me back with her rapier in one hand.

(Just where is this power coming from…)

“There’s only a single one recorded in my Jewel. Unlike that good-for-nothing Jewel in your hands, mine is a real Jewel.”

Yellow was supposed to manifest Rear Guard Skills.

Meaning that she has at least one of those on her person.

It would be a different story if the rapier itself and her accessories were Skill-imbued Magic Items, but those and gems interfered with one another.

Rear Guard had many magic-related offensive Skills. It’s often the case that a magic one specializes in becomes a Skill in itself.

The Fourth spoke.

『Just one? At least one Skill? Two at most… is there really a Skill that powerful?』

Whenever I tried to gain ground, she closed just as much. I was serious, but Celes was acting as if she was only playing around.

After being kicked out, I learned to use Skills. I experienced Growth. But it was all still just a game.

“I’m starting to bore of using weapons. Hey, let’s play with magic. I’m sure you’ve improved at least a little.”

With a bored look, she was a distance away in an instant.

It was a speed I could only see as instantaneous, and it was only barely through my Skills that I could tell she had physically moved at all.

Clenching my teeth, I held up my left hand.

(Take aim…)

“Thunder Clap!”

Lightning roared, and bolts fell down from the clouded sky.

Celes looked up.

“Magic Shield.”

A simple wall of Mana nullified my attack. She seemed a little disappointed, and uninterested…

“Is the one behind you your woman? Well, if she’s not, my deepest condolences… hey, if you can stand my next attack, how about I let you go? There’s got to be something you’re good at, brother.”

Calling me ‘brother’ with a full-on smile made my spine convulse. Getting over my cold fit, I knew she was going to make some sort of move, so I braced myself.

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… When the lightning rung out, Novem was able to confirm Lyle's location.

The side streets were made in a complicated arrangement, and she was having trouble pinning down his location.

Behind Novems hurried dash, ran Monica in her maid outfit.

"I'll be going ahead."

Saying that, she overtook Novem.

Watching Monica run off in a speed one couldn't think human, Novem began worrying obver whether she'd make it in time.

To Aria running behind, Novem spoke.

"Aria-san, can you use your Skill? Use it consecutively and get to where that lightning bolt struck?"

As Novem said that, Aria displayed some disapproval.

"It's not impossible, but going long distances like Lyle will be hard."

"I don't mind. If it's for an instant's explosive speed, then yours is the superior. Please make consecutive use of that."

Aria grasped the gem around her neck, and went ahead. She accelerated at a rate that could even surpass Monica's.

After seeing that, Novem confirmed that Miranda and Clara were following behind, before looking up at the sky.

Lights brought about by magic were forming one after another above the area the lightning had struck.

(… I can make it. I can still make it.)

She tightened her grip on the staff in her right hand…

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“Ahahaha! Splendid! Is that also the work of your Skills?”

She was sending me a grin, but I was quite beat up over here.

I made a wall of ice to protect Shannon and Eva, and around, the remnants of the destroyed walls of earth and stone were piling up like mountains.

Out of breath, my sweat was flowing like a fountain in the frigid air.

To my back, were Shannon and Eva.

If I ran now, the two of them would die.

“Lyle, just run already!”

Eva as well.

“You have to run… but how would he get out of this situation…”

She was frantically searching for my escape route.

“Running now would just incur her wrath…”

As I tried to give an excuse, Celes…

“Next is… how about an Ice Arrow!”

Holding up her left hand, she snapped her fingers, and created hundreds of arrows of ice around me. It wasn’t just as if the ice had

vaguely mimicked the shape of arrows.

Arrows that were flawless to the finest of details were coming our way.

“Kuh!”

I changed the sword in my hand to the bow, and set my aim on all the manufactured projectiles.

“Oh, so you still had something more? You’re going to entertain me this time, right?”

Delighted, Celes lowered her raised left arm.

And in the next instant, each and every one of those arrows started coming at me.

I used magic to make walls if dirt, strengthened them, and shot down all the ones that pierced through with my own arrows of light.

Those earth walls of mine were impaled several tens of hundreds of times. I thought I had built them sturdy, but they were shot through all too easily.

Looking at Celes, she had an especially large ice arrow– no, you’ve got to call that one a spear at this point– in her hand, as she watched me and laughed.

“Then can you shoot down this one?”

What she shot so happily wasn’t the same as her past projectiles. The places it passed by froze over, as if it the atmosphere around it was frozen as well.

I enlarged the bow, pulled it back strongly, and fired an arrow to clash with the one coming at me. They let off a bang, and the temperature of the area instantly dropped a few degrees.

From the places the arrows burst, petals of ice fluttered about and

glittered in the light.

Seeing them, Celes seemed quite moved.

“How beautiful. Like looking at a mirror.”

That was followed by applause, and it felt like I alone was the one who had wandered into another world.

I pulled the bow and fired another arrow.

Aimed at Celes, of course.

But she didn’t panic.

“That’s also a Skill, right? Setting an aim, and having it pursue a foe… that’s…”

Holding up her rapier, she snapped it like a whip to destroy the light arrow.

It did explode, but she emerged from that without a scratch.

“Aw~ that one was my favorite coat. Look, you went and got dirt all over it. I wonder who I’ll give it to after this. How about a knight to be married? Having him clutch this cloth as he sleeps rather than his mate sounds an interesting notion.”

While displaying a face full of innocence, she began to twirl on the spot.

Around her, some knights even volunteered themselves as candidates to receive such a fate.

Seeing them, the Sixth.

『What, just what is all of this!?』

He couldn’t comprehend it.

And the fifth spoke.

『It's worse than I imagined. It's not like I was taking the First's words lightly, but… no, it's possible not even the Founder could think it this deep.』

The time the monstrous vixen came to be was a period fifty years prior to the First's birth.

Even if the stories were handed down, it's unlikely he actually experienced it.

In the current world, there wasn't a soul left who could speak from experience.

Perhaps Celes tired of spinning, as she stopped, and looked at me.

"Ah~ that was fun. But *this* is the end. It really was a treat… well then, bye-bye."

Celes thrust out the rapier, and I turned it aside with the bow's body.

I immediately changed it to the great sword and slashed, only getting into an extended exchange of blades with her…

"You're slow. I'm even letting you drop my speed all you want with that Skill of yours, yet you fail to deliver."

My right shoulder was cut through, and I felt a pain in my left thigh on her next thrust.

I was somehow managing to repel her attacks, but I couldn't manage all of them.

I used a hand to fire magic at the ground, raising a snow to cover her vision, but even within that world of white, she continued swinging around her rapier as free as the wind.

The snow around my person started staining itself the crimson color of my blood.

“Was that supposed to be a smokescreen? I can tell even with my eyes closed. Your breath, and your beat, the sound of your muscles grating… even the flow of the air is there to tell me where you stand before me.”

The Third was lost in thought as he looked at Celes.

And the Seventh…

『That’s not Celes. As if someone could change so much after merely holding a Jewel… and wait, just what sort of Skill does she have, anyways!?』

Having used too much Mana, it became impossible for me to keep up the sword.

I took out the dagger, and returned the Jewel to its usual necklace state.

If I let my consciousness fade, I’m sure I’d be killed just like that.

I was a little unsteady from my loss of blood, but I held up the smaller blade and glared at her.

“It’s rare to find a human that puts up so much resistance. But I guess such battles aren’t bad on occasion, lest it all lose its thrill. Yep, as I thought… it’s no fun when there’s no one to oppose me. Once I crush Lyle, I wonder who I’ll play with next? Come to think of it, there’s that Faunbeux dog that even now continues to cling to Rufus. The countries around raising protest… the internal nobles who won’t obey… Aha! Ahahaha! Now how shall I have fun with them?”

While losing more and more blood, I addressed her.

“You’re quite a twisted one, you know…”

“Hmm? What are you trying to say?”

She continued to direct me a smile.

“Just who are you anyways? You’re not Celes, are you?”

My old memories of my sister are faint at best. The memories from age ten onwards were too strong for me to want to recall anything beyond.

But she shouldn’t have been a sister like the girl before my eyes.

“I am Celes… Celes Walt. Novem should know that well enough.”

Since Novem’s name came out, I tried to ask the reason for it.

But Celes didn’t seem to care.

“And I’ve already lost interest. Yep, we’re done here.”

Saying that, the edge of her rapier began to glow red with heat.

Perhaps she was using magic on it.

(I won’t make it!)

Late to react to her thrust, I was sure I wouldn’t be able to dodge.

But…

…

A ball of snow dropped onto Celes’ head from above.

The one to throw it looked to be Shannon.

Celes glared at Shannon. She retracted her rapier, and concentrated her attention over there.

I immediately wrung out my power to encase Shannon and Evan in walls of earth, and stood before my sister.

Celes was expressionless. The light fading from her eyes, she quietly…

“I’ll kill you. A brat with nothing but a good set of eyes to her… do you realize what it is you’ve done to me?”

Concentrating magic to blow my walls away altogether, it seems her target wasn’t me, but Shannon.

I wasn’t even being factored into consideration.

At this rate, she was going to be killed.

And it was at the moment the thought had crossed my mind.

The dagger in my hand let off a faint light.

(So this is the Skill Rondo-san decided to choose…)

A simple one. One to resist magic… a Skill to protect one’s comrades, and one I thought fitting of the man.

I thought I wouldn’t be able to use it due to the Jewel’s interference, but at this point, it was definitely reacting.

It created a simple wall of Mana around me, blocking the magic Celes shot out.

A maelstrom of flames melted all the snow around, making the temperature skyrocket. It was the magic 【Fire Storm】, but its output had risen since the last time she had used it on me.

Perhaps because I was making use of the dagger, the ancestral voices of the Jewel only came out in broken bits and pieces.

And while all the Mana in my body was gradually siphoned out, I withstood Celes’ outburst.

(But at this rate, without accomplishing anything… at the very least, I’ll end it with…)

I looked at the snow below me.

It remained as the flames had passed around, and as the storm subsided I looked at Celes.

I'm sure it went beyond its limit. The dagger shattered.

I collapsed at the knees, and without any strength left to stand, all I could do was watch her.

Looking over me, she spoke in an uninterested tone.

"… How boring. Is that the extent you've grown? You were more fun to play with before you left the house."

From that point, my power and technique and speed had risen, but the same held true for her. From the time we fought last, she had certainly become stronger.

However…

A ball of snow came at her head again.

A soft sound quietly reverberated in the air, making the corner of my lips curl.

I forced myself to smile.

It was the last bit of fruitless resistance I could put up.

"What's wrong? Are you perhaps weak to attacks to the face?"

As I provoked her, she expressionlessly looked over me, and made a stance that would clearly lead to her rapier running through my body.

Within my slowing vision, all I could think of was my desire to, at the very least, protect the two behind me.

Chapter 11: Septem

"I won't let you!"

Hearing Monica's voice, I saw her spin as she descended down from up high.

Both her hands were gripped onto a mace, and with it, she delivered a blow that would lead any human it encountered to a tragic end.

It looks like my last breath wasn't to fall on this white and red road.

No, perhaps I'd merely gained a little time.

The lowered mace was received with the rapier.

The air pressure from the swing caused the snow surrounding Celes to hover, and after Monica came to a halt in the air, their hairs rustled just a little bit.

It was quite an unbelievable scene.

Monica's strike had truly been heavy.

A human… stopping it with such a slender rapier should be impossible by common sense.

But for Celes to accomplish such a feat was something I found myself accepting as natural.

"For someone to direct true hostility at me… you're the second."

Leaping away from Celes, Monica held up her weapon in both hands.

In the next instant, Aria's back appeared in front of me.

Making her entrance skidding through the gap Celes left, her breathing was a mess.

“This is the first… time I’ve… used it in such succession, but… it looks like I’ve made it.”

By looking around, she seemed to understand the danger of the situation. She didn’t have along her spear, but she drew a dagger hanging at her waist, and got into position.

Celes’ eyes were turned to the yellow Jewel on the rapier, and she slowly turned her sights to Monica and Aria.

“One Skill user, and an ancient mechanical doll… interesting. Let’s add them to my collection.”

Celes looked at me.

I couldn’t move my body as I wanted, and with my limbs firmly planted to the ground, I could only return that stare.

Aria seemed to notice an abnormality.

“Just what are you…”

Locking eyes with Aria, Celes let out a light sigh.

She looked to be a bit troubled.

“It’s no good. Normally a look would be enough. Oy doll over there, do you have the mind to be mine? I’ll treasure more than Lyle ever did.”

Monica chucked her mace at Celes full force, before producing another identical one from the contents of her skirt.

Celes used her rapier to repel one and bisect the other.

The repelled mace rolled around close to me.

“I see. What a pity.”

And after Celes said that much, Monica gave her response.

“I’d appreciate it if you referred to me as an automaton or maid rather than a doll. But for me to hold animosity… are you human?”

She spoke as if Celes was no mere human, and in my inner thoughts, I was sure she wasn’t wrong.

Something that had transcended the term. That’s the impression Celes lightly tossed out.

After giggling a little, Celes spoke to her.

“When you’re merely a fake that manifested in the labyrinth yourself, you sure are stuck on the details.”

Celes put up a tone as if she knew something special, but Monica simply scoffed.

“And yet I still exist, with a chicken dickwad here to serve. Be I a real construct or not makes no difference at all!”

The Fourth gave me a simple analysis of the situation.

『Even with two extra, you’re still at a disadvantage. Lyle, confirm if anyone else is headed this way. And… make sure you definitely check if Novem-chan is coming.』

He spoke tensely with some doubt.

I didn’t want to suspect her, but Celes had definitely voiced Novem’s name.

“… Aria, where are the others?”

I confirmed with her quietly.

She responded in a soft voice.

“They’ll all be here soon. Only Monica and I went ahead.”

Hearing that, I spoke.

“Did Novem say anything?”

“I came here in quite a rush, you know? And after getting here, it’s all about Novem? I went as fast as I could, just to let you know? Even so, why are none of the people around us moving?”

As she took some nervous glances at the surroundings, I followed along.

Knights, soldiers, civilians… all of them were looking at Celes.

Among them, some onlookers were even letting their tear ducts flow.

I mustered some strength to reach for the mace near me.

The Fifth.

『Lyle… why must you go so far? Are you irritated you lost? Or is it mere stubbornness? What is there to gain, getting angry just because someone or another talked down to you!?』

He sounded worried for me.

(Right, we’ve been together for more than half a year… it seems I’ve gotten to understand some things.)

The usually-aloof Third Generation offered my some advice.

『Lyle, can you try holding out until Novem-chan gets here?』

The Sixth didn’t think that highly of Novem.

Just as the daughter of a house he associated with.

『Third, do you have something in mind?』

The Seventh worried for me.

『A way to get through here, and let Lyle live another day?』

But the Third denied those allegations.

『That's a dilemma more troublesome than you can imagine. She's a moody one, and her hostility to our Lyle is strong. She voiced Novem-chan's name, so if you hold out until then, something's sure to be set in motion. Not that I can say if it's for better or worse.』

Then isn't escape the better option?

Even at that point, that was not what was on my mind.

By fighting and observing, that's what I could understand.

I can't escape from Celes. She'd easily catch up, and the battle would rage on.

The Fifth also seemed aware.

『There's too much a gap in strength. I never thought it would be this large… we were naïve. If it was the current Lyle, then I thought that at the very least, escape would be a valid option from the description he gave of her.』

The Fourth spoke to me.

『Buying time should be fine, but I wonder how far Monica and Aria can hold out.』

I took some deep breaths, looked at Celes, and smiled.

"… Is something the matter?"

"No, not really."

But saying that, I grinned and watched Celes once more.

Her eyebrows twitching a little in reaction, she instantly entered the gap between me and Aria.

That meant she had taken Aria's back, so Aria turned around with her eyes wide open.

Celes grasped my and hoisted my up by the collar, but even so, I laughed.

Holding up a mace, Monica rushed towards Celes, while Aria stabbed down her dagger… before the two of them were sent flying into a wall.

They both hit the wall head-on. Perhaps Aria used a Skill to defend herself, as she instantly rose.

Monica crashed through, making a hole, before emerging from another wall.

I was surprised at her appearance, but Celes easily kicked her away.

The automaton rolled quite a distance away before standing to face Celes.

"Stand down!"

As I called for her to stop, Celes turned to look at me.

"Chicken…"

I knew well enough that Monica was trying to resolve the present situation, but her opponent was too much.

"Just sit there and watch."

And in the next instant, my back was smitten with a sturdy wall.

With me still in her hands, Celes had slammed me into it.

Expressionlessly, she watched me, and opened her mouth.

"You sure seem lax. Given up already?"

Blood dripped down from my mouth, and on top of the pain, my mind seemed it would leave me at any moment, but I endured it, and smiled at her.

It seems she hated being made light of. At least that part of her was still immature.

“Satisfied yet?”

“Huh?”

Not in her usual condescending smile, Celes glared at me.

“I’m asking if you’re satisfied yet. You’ve gotten your overwhelming power, and you’ve used it to crush the weak. Having fun yet? Well then that perfect… quite fitting of you.”

After I said that, Celes stuck her blade through my left arm, nailing me with it to the wall. As she ground it back and forth, I let out a scream.

“AAaaaaAh!!”

While such an indescribable sound escaped my mouth, I continued smiling at her.

(Yeah, that’s right, harassing her is just that much fun! I knew she’d do it, so I… dammit, it hurts!!)

The Third.

『Lyle, how about you keep your provocations in moderation? But I’ll praise you for not making a sacrifice of the other two. It really was a gamble, but it seems looks like you’re in time. Well, the important thing is how things start moving from here on out.』

And there, Novem ran onto the stage.

“Lyle-sama!”

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… Novem watched Celes suddenly pull her rapier from Lyle's arm, and take some distance.

She had decided to follow Lyle when he left Walt Territory. So the two woman hadn't seen one another for a period over half a year in length.

She had grown even more from before, and her atmosphere was becoming even more fascinating.

Holding a beauty unbefitting her age, Celes watched an out of breath Novem race over to Lyle. She neither called out nor launched an attack.

Novem immediately began treating Lyle, going as far as to show Celes her back.

The boy could lose consciousness at any moment, but to Novem…

"Monica's probably beyond magic, but please take care of Aria and Shannon, and Eva's treatments first…"

Saying that, power left his body, and Novem held it close.

Gently laying him down on a bed of snow, Novem turned to Celes.

When Miranda arrived, she ran to Aria.

And Clara to Monica.

Standing in a position as if to protect Lyle, emergency first aid completed, Novem pointed the staff in her hands at Celes.

"… This isn't what you promised. You said you wouldn't raise a hand, right?"

Hearing that, Celes directed some fleeting glances towards her yellow

Jewel.

It was as if she was going against its will, and Celes herself wanted to cut Novem down on the spot.

Novem seemed to understand that.

Celes returned her rapier to its sheath, and addressed her.

And the moment her weapon was put away, the knights gathered at her side.

“Yes, yes, sorry about that. My bad. But he’s the one that threw the first stone.”

Seeing her laugh to herself, Novem looked around, and saw Alfred and the soldier collapsed nearby. Snow had begun to pile on them.

She could easily understand that Celes was the one to take both of them out.

“That’s a lie. Lyle-sama isn’t that sort of person. The one to throw the first blow was your Alfred, was it not?”

Novem was aware of Alfred’s actions up to now. After all, she was the daughter of the Forxuz House, a house deeply connected with the Walts.

Celes feigned innocence.

“No idea~! I mean, they were already fighting when I got here.”

Still giggling to herself, she moved to leave the area.

Novem spoke to her.

“If Lyle-sama was to have died… I’d have fought, even with you as my opponent, Celes-sama.”

Celes stopped in her tracks. The knights around her reached for the hilts of their blades.

A few among them knew of Novem.

“The mere daughter of the Forxuzes thinks to turn a blade at Celes-sama!?”
“So the one betrothed to a failure is a failure after all!”
“When you’re nothing but the Forxuzes second daughter…”

Novem ignored them altogether.

That’s all she could do.

Because the emotion she held to them was one called ‘pity’.

(For the Walt House’s knights to have fallen this far…)

They were once splendid knights, rejoicing as Lyle matured. They got rowdy over who would take part in the boy’s first campaign, and often laughed around many a drink.

Even Alfred once doted on Lyle like a brother to his younger.

But that…

“Nothing to say in response? Or perhaps… you’d answer better to the name 【Septem】?”

Novem gripped her staff harder, making it so she could fire off magic at any time. Celes turned to her with quite an enraged expression.

“Don’t call my by that name. I am Celes… of the House you Forxuzes have always held so dear, the Walt House… their daughter. Can you really lay a hand on me?”

In the latter half of her speech, Celes began making a triumphant expression.

Novem lowered her staff.

To the Forxuz House, the Walt House held an important meaning.

(Then if she's still Celes-sama, I won't interfere.)

And it was for that sake that her house continued supporting them from the shadows.

"… Now about your promise not to lay a hand on Lyle-sama."

Celes seemed largely uninterested.

"I forgot about it. My bad. But… the next time I see him, I really will carve him up. I'll make sure to show you as well, so do care not to let him wander into my field of vision. Ah, but…"

Celes leaned forward, the index finger of her right hand resting on her lips.

Her pose was a lovable one, innocent as can be.

"There will be an important announcement in three days' time, and I don't mind if I see you in the plaza then. Go tell that to Lyle as well… he'll even be able to see his parents, so come watch with his fingers crossed."

Bursting into laughter, Celes left surrounded by her knights.

She sent a glance to Miranda and Clara as well, but as they didn't show any interest, she walked on with a bored expression.

The soldiers recovered Alfred and his soldier's remains, and now nothing remained in the area besides piled of rubble and snow.

Miranda lent Aria a shoulder, but she watched Celes go by all the way.

"… She's even worse than when I last saw her."

Having met her several years before, Miranda could understand that Celes had grown.

Aria stared at her back with regret.

“For me to be useless…”

Novem spoke to her.

“No, Aria-san, you put up some splendid resistance.”

“I don’t need your consolation. It’s a fact that I couldn’t do anything.”

Clara also walked alongside Monica.

(Normally, such a scene would never come to be.)

With Lyle collapsed, Monica noticed she couldn’t operate in her normal state.

And Monica glared at Novem.

“You know quite a lot of somethings, don’t you? I’ll have you answer me. What is your goal!?”

Perhaps she would become an enemy to Lyle. Determining that, Monica pressed her.

Novem seemed a little bewildered, but she made a bitter smile.

“I’ll carry out Shannon-chan and Eva-san’s treatment first. Because it’s cold out here. We have to get Lyle-sama up and moving as well.”

Monica stated she wouldn’t let Novem lay a hand on Lyle, draping him over her own shoulders.

And within that road that usually experienced very little traffic, a carriage came to a stop before their eyes…

Chapter 12: Let Me Start Your Story

… The mansion in use by the Faunbeux royal family.

In the room they had borrow, Novem nursed Lyle by his side.

While he slept, his injuries had been wiped away with healing magic.

But perhaps do to his physical fatigue and dearth of Mana, he had still yet to open his eyes.

To his other side, Monica stationed herself in sleep mode to cut his Mana expenditure. Asleep in a standing posture, she had been quite reluctant to allow Novem to look after Lyle.

But it was also fact that they had no one to use healing magic besides Novem, and that Monica operated on Lyle's Mana.

It was a situation where she couldn't take care of him herself, so she prioritized his recovery.

Clara entered the room.

"I've recovered our belongings from the inn. Just as Miranda-san said, it was under watch."

Aria and Eva were both injured as well, so they were resting.

Novem directed a smile to Clara.

"Is that so? Thank you. You should rest too, Clara-san."

Clara looked at Novem.

Rather than doubtful, she was worried.

"You've been healing him without rest since yesterday, haven't you? If *you* don't rest, then…"

Novem shook her head, and looked at Lyle.

“I’ve no idea when Lyle-sama will wake, so I must.”

Clara looked back and forth between Novem and Lyle before resting her eyes on Monica.

And she inquired to the battle with Celes, a situation she had yet to fully believe.

“When I saw that Monica-san and Aria-san had lost, I looked at Lyle-san’s sister, and for some reason thought there was no helping it… Novem-san, have you fought with that person and come out victorious?”

Clara surely remembered how it seemed that Novem and Celes were negotiating on equal ground.

Does that mean Novem was strong enough to put Celes on guard?

That’s what she thought.

But the truth was different.

“No, even if I fought, we would have lost.”

Clara kept her eyes on Monica and spoke.

“Even Lyle-san couldn’t do a single thing. And Monica-san was unable to even scratch her. Such a person really exists, right.”

Novem explained.

“In the past, Celes-sama was just a normal girl. A little timid, hiding herself behind Lyle-sama’s back…”

It was a description from close to six years passed.

(By the time I noticed, it was already much too late.)

And if she couldn't stop her, then what? Novem had thought over it time and again.

But her inability to stop it had resulted in her engagement to Lyle.

(How ironic. That it be by Septem's influence.)

The Forxuz Baron House was one that had supported the Walt House from times long gone.

Even after the Walt House's Head two generations prior elevated them to a Baron House, that relation didn't change.

And the second daughter of such a house, Novem, had visited the Walt House's mansion numerous times.

After her engagement was decided, she had continued stepping into those walls time and again.

(I'm sure my predecessor noticed it. That's why Lyle-sama was able to inherit the Walt family's treasure… as I thought, the one to succeed the Walt House should be Lyle-sama.)

No matter how proficient Celes may be, she'd never be able to properly manage anything with that personality of hers.

That was something the House that lived alongside the Walts would not be able to accept.

"… Celes-san, was it? I still can't believe it. I even felt something sublime from that lass. You're saying she wasn't always like that?"

Novem directed a wry smile at Clara.

"I wonder what I should say. But… perhaps the time to speak has come. It was supposed to come much further down the line, though."

Saying that, Novem let her hand touch Lyle's face.

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… Within the Jewel.

『I'm definitely not at fault! I mean, I only learned about Jewels after Lyle became the wielder and we awakened! Back when it was in my wife's hands, I could only think of it as nothing but a yellow gem!』

The Seventh frantically gave excuses to the four chastising eyes falling on him.

Novem's dialogue was one thing, but thinking back to Celes' case, there was quite a bit of dissatisfaction in store for the Seventh.

Though all of them did understand that the Seventh wasn't all at fault.

Taking the assets one's wife brought with them and destroying them wasn't something normally permissible.

If it hadn't come down to this, the Seventh would likely have been able to use that point to argue his case.

Even when he knew there was nothing that could be done, the Third pressured the Seventh.

『Agrissa's descendent, Zenoire… it would be difficult to notice the gem that child carried around was a Jewel like ours. But since you said it was kept under maximum security, I'd like to hear your reasons.』

The Seventh rebutted.

『So you're saying its even possible to realize that a rock contained not only Skills, but emotions and memory? Even if I've a fragment of responsibility in the matter, there's no way I could have anticipated it. And to Zenoire, it was only something to be looked after by daughters of the clan…』

The Fourth put together the information gathered.

『So the Seventh's wife was unaware, is that how it is? And Celes awoke it… I'm curious as to how Celes got her hands on the Jewel, but how about we proceed this talk somewhere more productive? We've all taken enough swings at the Seventh.』

The Seventh clenched his fist, and hit it against the round table.

『To understand that, yet waste your time in such a manner… you brutes!』

The Sixth spoke out in a troubled expression.

Everyone angled their ears to him.

『If you're looking at the result alone, Lyle's decision was correct. If he ran, he was sure to be followed. In the worst case, while running… There's the possibility Lyle would have escaped to an area devoid of people to prevent Novem and the others from being dragged into the mix.』

The Third nodded.

『And in that case, all that's left is to die. It isn't a matter of not having enough competence. That one's already in another dimension. Even all the men gathered here, in our primes, I wonder how far we'd go against that…』

All the ancestors gathered had taken forms around their thirties.

The forms of their golden days.

And the Seventh put the feelings of such ancestors to words.

『It's impossible. I'd more or less be able to put up a resistance, but winning would be out of the question.』

The Sixth spoke in succession.

『The actions of Lyle, who challenged such an enemy… I can't praise them, but…』

The one to speak after the Sixth was the Fourth.

『So result-wise, he was correct. Well, he's got quite a bit of luck on him. That's just the sort of fortune Lyle has.』

The Fifth.

『but even that is insufficient. Lyle will not be able to triumph over Celes.』

The Third too.

『Yep, I doubt he'll win… as he is right now, at least.』

All of their opinions aligned.

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… In the Faunbeux mansion, Novem was surrounded.

It was the evening of the second day after their fight with Celes.

Perhaps Lyle had recovered sufficiently, as Monica was operational.

An injured Aria had come to the room, and Miranda had brought Shannon along.

Clara was fidgeting in the doubtful air.

"… You wanted to ask something?"

Acting as a representative, Miranda posed the question.

She had always been wary of Novem, and decided to use this matter to press on it.

Prepared for even the dissolution of the party, she took a single glance at Lyle on the bed.

And…

"That's right. What I want to hear is about your relation to Lyle's sister. And I've always found you an unnatural one. Why did you leave us at Lyle's side? You're the one proceeding all of that, right? Wouldn't it usually be the other way around?"

What Miranda found strange was Novem's actions.

She could understand that she treasured Lyle, and she didn't think that was a lie.

But even so, Novem was taking an active role in expanding Lyle's harem.

Even when she was in a spot where she should be denying such recruitments.

Novem made a troubled expression.

And she leisurely explained.

"… My household is one that has continued to serve Lyle-sama's household for generations. Such a relation has gone on for over two hundred years, and it's even been said that rather than the royal line, we've only ever pledged our loyalty to the Walt House."

Miranda was already well aware of that one.

For better or worse the Walts were a House that continued growing larger and larger.

They had a firm connection with retainers, but there was a single baron house that tagged alongside them and aided them from their starts.

Usually, having quarrels all around was the world of nobility.

But without blood relations or mutual interests, the Forxuz House that continued to serve the Walts was a novelty even among the nobles.

If they had the mind, the Forxuz House would have been able to usurp the Walt House time and again.

So it was said that the House to look upon the Walts as their royalty was the Forxuz House.

“I already know from my investigations. And it was also quite famous, so I found out immediately. So why is it that rather than Celes, you chose to follow and abide by Lyle?”

Miranda was quite cautious. She had a dagger hung at her waist.

(Celes, who even Lyle couldn’t win against, was wary of Novem… I knew she was hiding her real strength, but I never thought it so high. What could be the meaning of this?)

If she were to trust her own eyes, Novem had always been hiding her abilities.

But Miranda didn’t think her as a monster on Celes’ level.

“… I suppose you all won’t be satisfied with the answer of, ‘being formerly engaged’.”

As if she had gained the intention to inform then of everything, Novem corrected her posture.

“It’s just as you’ve all seen. The current Celes is abnormal. What’s more, she plays with everything around her to her will. Just as Agrissa once did.”

Clara explained to the ones gathered that didn’t seem to understand.

Her eyes were mostly directed at Aria.

“It’s the name of a queen who lived three hundred years ago. She’s called names such as the beautiful vixen, or charming witch, or the like. Her beauty encharmed her surroundings, and she’s the individual that is said to have led to the collapse of the country occupying this land before Bahnseim.”

Aria’s eyes were swimming.

“R-right, I get the feeling I’ve heard something like that before…”

Miranda touched her hand to her forehead.

(She’s definitely oblivious.)

A little fed-up, she continued listening in on Novem’s explanation.

“… Both Lyle-sama and Celes-sama carry the blood of that person.”

All besides Monica showed surprise.

Tiredly, Monica spoke.

“Well it’s to be expected she still has living relatives. What’s to be so shocked about? I heard that the blood of magic users is valuable, and it’s the nobles that try to preserve it.”

Aria shot back in response.

“The blood of a villain should just be let die out! So the survivors that moved out to a remote region were the Walts, is what you’re saying!?”

Novem shook her head.

“No, the one the preceding head welcomed in as a wife was the one to carry on her bloodline. If I may add on to that, she’s the daughter of the one who headed the rebellion of the time. A marquis.”

Shannon opened and closed her mouth in panic.

After coming this far, Miranda began to ponder whether Celes really was Agrissa reborn.

That's just how strange Centralle had become.

"So does that make Celes the rebirth of Agrissa? And you're trying to say her carrying the queen's blood made it possible?"

Novem denied that.

"No, it's largely irrelevant. The problem lies in the yellow gem Celes-sama caries."

All of their eyes fell on the blue gem lying close to Lyle's body. Aria alone was looking at her own red one instead.

"From the time she started carrying it, Celes-sama changed. I noticed that, and negotiated with her. For her not to lay hands on Lyle-sama."

Clara spoke to her.

"How did you manage to do that?"

"… At that point, her powers were still weak, I suppose."

(Yep, she's definitely hiding something.)

Miranda knew by intuition, but Novem went on.

"After that, I protected Lyle-sama. And after learning he had been driven out of the Walt House, I rushed to his side at once… I am aware that Lyle does not desire a harem. I am also aware of his intentions to flee from Bahnseim."

In that case, then why…

Miranda was about to say that, before novem offered an apology to everyone.

"I offer my deepest apologies. But if ther's anyone capable of stopping

Celes-sama… then that is Lyle-sama. That is what I believed."

Meaning Novem…

"That's why, for the possibility that Lyle-sama might come to stand against her, I prioritized gathering women able to resist Celes-sama. As those of the opposite gender, males are too easily charmed by her."

… They were all mere pieces harvested up for Lyle to fight against Celes someday.

Hearing that, Aria left the room.

Clara followed her out.

Miranda also took Shannon along to leave.

And Novem merely watched the affair in silence.

"We're leaving, Shannon."

"Eh? But…"

Shannon was looking at Lyle, but Miranda forcefully dragged her out.

After leaving the room, she noticed a woman with light pink hair hastily try to conceal herself, but she ignored her…

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When I opened my eyes, I was within the Jewel.

"… Is it alright that I assume the fact that I'm here means that I'm alive?"

Around, I saw the forms of my ancestors in their seats, and I was

about to ask and confirm the situation I was in, but…

『Lyle.』

The Third looked at me with a serious expression.

And unlike usual, it was the very epitome of severity.

I responded.

“Yes?”

『I’ll bet you’ve much to ask, and we’d like to answer you as well. But for now, can you let us say our conclusion?』

So did they discuss and resolve this beforehand? I decided to listen to what their opinion on the matter was.

The Third declared.

『We’ll be having you leave Bahnsaim as soon as time permits. You shall not get involved with Celes anymore. The Walt House either.』

Those words made me swallow my breath.

The Fourth, Sixth and Seventh had said they wished of me to succeed the territory.

The Third and Fifth that it was up to me.

And now all five of them were telling me to simply run, and that the land was irrelevant.

The Fourth continued.

『It’s best for it to be as far as possible. Maybe crossing the sea will be nice. Just live in peace with whoever has the will to tag along. It’s fine, if you want to claim some land no one’s set foot in before, and become lord, we have much advice to give. That sort of thing is the Third’s specialty, and I can teach you how to spend money productively.』

The Fifth.

『With all the time saved on trial and error, I estimate you'll have a stable stronghold in ten to twenty years. Well, it does depend on the location, but you can just avoid the disadvantageous points.』

The Sixth also nodded.

『In a distand foreign land, the Walt House shall rise once more. If you're a man, then this much is nothing.』

The Seventh.

『You'll have to work to the objective and ways of that country as well, but it's in no ways impossible for you to become a feudal lord once more. To get some strength under your belt, you can organize a reputable mercenary force, and do some service for the government there, can't you? Use our Skills, and you'll be famous in no time. Getting to Baron Class in your generation alone is no dream!』

With the Seventh's encouraging smile as a trigger, the others started getting rowdy over what my future held.

The Third.

『If you clear five labyrinths, you're considered first rate as an adventurer, right? If you do ten, then I'm sure some stable and well off country will offer you land somewhere.』

The Fourth was…

『But don't you think a tense country sound better? They'll be in need of some military might, so Lyle will definitely be able to become a noble on good terms.』

The Fifth.

『But I doubt he'd want to be in war all the time. More so, how about you find a place that needs some reorganization in domestic affairs? If it's

to a certain extent, he can start with giving some advice.』

The Sixth.

『But it's important to be a native in those sorts of areas, so a country with some extent of war is…』

The Seventh.

『I wonder if there's a moderate country out there where our powers can contribute to victory. If there's a place short on hands, you can get yourself depended on by the top in no time. Give some moderate contributions, and do perform some moderate reforms… don't worry about it. With all of us gathered here, it's more than possible.』

But in front of such a merry meeting of my ancestors, I lowered my head and apologized.

"I'm sorry… I cannot do that."

And it all went quiet. The harmonious atmosphere disappeared without a trace, and they all watched me with serious expressions.

The Third opened his mouth.

『What do you mean by that? I hope you're not saying you'll fight against Celes, right?』

"I will fight. I will fight Celes."

I looked straight at him.

But the ancestors seemed opposed.

『Lyle, you were driven out of the Walt House. At this point, you could even call that your fortune. And from how things are going, it's not just going to be the Walt House anymore. The country… Bahnseim itself will become your enemy.』

The Fourth corrected the positioning of his glasses with his index

finger. They caught the light as he explained the present situation.

『Even if you have more Skills to use than most, you're short on personnel. And I'm talking on a national level here. Novem, Aria, Miranda, Shannon, Clara, Monica… you think that's enough to go against this country? Individuals and the few don't topple nations.』

I shook my head.

"Yes, I cannot win. I'd like to believe I understand that."

The Fifth spoke.

『Lyle, then you can't call that fighting. It's just plain suicide. Because Celes spoke ill of what you hold dear, you have to get revenge? I'll be blunt here, your choice is mistaken. Anyone would laugh at it. At the choice of an incorrigible fool!』

But even so, I shook my head.

"And even then, I'll fight Celes. I get it. That if it goes on like this, she'll never be stopped. That thousands, tens of thousands, perhaps even hundreds of thousands will die."

The Sixth corrected my opinion.

『Wrong. You're looking in the ten millions here. That thing will at least go that far. And Celes has enough time. That much is to be expected.』

Hearing that, I raised my face.

The ceiling of the Jewel was something I had never seen before.

The ceiling was of the same design as the table, and in the center of it, a large and round lapis stone was imbedded. The ceiling was high, and around it, twenty three smaller blue gemstones were arranged.

That was likely the number of Skills.

The pattern with only two was likely mine.

“I do have the mind to get revenge on Celes, and the mind to be recognized by my parents. But more than that… if I’m to leave her like this, then countless lives will be played to her whim…”

The Seventh lay down my opinion with a levelheadedness he didn’t usually direct.

『Don’t misunderstand. She’s merely increasing the scale, and even if Celes didn’t do anything, war will break out. I’m sure there’s already one going on somewhere. Inhuman acts are happening all over foreign lands. Whether Celes is the one to cause them, or not, what changes is only the scale.』

The Fourth was looking at me fed-up.

『Idealism is fine and all. But look here, you’ve got to preach them after you’ve gotten able to protect the precious people around you. Using Skills, you’re only a little more proficient than the masses. Can a man protected by Novem-chan and the rest protect anyone else?』

I took in all their words. But I could only think that I had to do something about Celes myself.

I was more than aware. They were the thoughts of a child unable to understand the cruelty of realty.

And even so…

“If I’m to run here, the Walt House will be spoken of as the greatest of evils for all history to come.”

The Third scoffed.

『So what? Splendid. Do you hear any of us telling you to stop Celes? To be blunt here, as long as you survive, Lyle, the blood will carry on. That’s enough for me.』

“All that you’ve amassed, your legacies… it’ll all be for naught!”

The Fourth disinterestedly…

『You're too caught up on the past. Isn't it fine? Just start it up from scratch again. Do you think our Founder ever mulled over those details? Present over past. Even over the future, you only have the present to live in..』

"So just abandon it all? Throw away all the sinless people to be killed by Celes, and find happiness for myself alone? I'm not shameless enough for that!"

The Fifth.

『What are you so high and mighty about? Just who out there told you to hold responsibility for it? Responsibility is something the guys with authority have. Meaning… something the current Walt House's Head and the King of Bahnseim should have, and not something you have the right to bear. Do you know of the word 'pretentious'?』

"You ancestors are the ones who told me to carry on the territory. Changing course at this point in time?"

The Sixth glared at me.

『That's right. That thing is too dangerous. It's the right choice, isn't it? That you won't win is something every single person present has determined.』

"Just what do you mean by right? Then are my thoughts in the wrong? Is trying to stop Celes something so wrong to attempt!?"

As I screamed out, the Seventh spoke.

『No, you're right. You're right enough to make me sick. Then just do what you want. From this point on, I won't offer the slightest of advice or assistance. We're not nice enough folks to pay mind to a child knowingly rushing off to his death.』

The heads of history lived their lives as feudal lords. The various

members used various ways to protect and advance the territory.

I should know well enough that the world isn't one you can live through on ideals.

"… I'm ignorant to the ways of the world."

The Third nodded.

『That's right. On top of that, an idiot.』

"I couldn't win against Celes."

『I'm really questioning whether there's *anyone* out there who *can* win against here, you know.』

"If Novem wasn't there, I'd never even have gotten this far."

『And even that Novem-chan seems to have some ulterior motives, right? Can you continue to believe in her as you have? It's possible she even has connections with that sister of yours. No, even as we speak, she may be happily reporting to Celes on your present state.』

"… Shut up."

『What was that? You want to say something to us?』

The low and threatening voice he used was the same enraged one the aloof man let out when he punched the King.

I felt an unpleasant sweat creep along my spine, but…

【Don't lose】
【Do your best】

… I remembered the First's and Second's words.

(So what about Skills? So what if I'm weak? I know all of that! But if I don't stand up here, am I just to spend the rest of my life cowering in Celes' shadow? After being recognized by those men, you're telling me to

live such a life… don't screw with me!)

"… Don't screw with me."

『Ah?』

The Third and the surrounding Ancestors were sending stares vicious enough to make me tremble.

They'd lived through much more carnage than me, the determination of these men of valor.

Fifteen years… I was going to turn sixteen soon. A kid like me must be nothing but an oblivious brat from their point of view.

I know.

I know, but.

"I told you not to screw with me! As if I care! No assistance? No advice? No Skill either? Go do what *you* want! The First's and Second's Skills are already mine! My Second Stage Skill 【Connection】 manifested as well! No help? And so what! I decided it, and I'm going to carry it out! So just watch from the Jewel, I'll definitely pull it off… whether you all oppose, or reject, I've already decided. I will fight Celes!"

Hearing my words, the Third scratched his head.

The Fourth removed his glasses, and started wiping off the lenses.
The Fifth looked at the ceiling with his hand on his brow.
The Sixth let out a deep sigh.
The Seventh had his fingers over the area around his eyes.

As a representative of them all, the Third stood and clapped his hands.

『You pass. Of course, all actions henceforth are your responsibility alone. But fret not; we're here to help you along. We'll offer more assistance than before.』

"… What do you mean."

Putting his glasses back on, the Fourth quietly explained.

『Don't look so mad. It was just a little bit of a test. And you see, it's not as if we don't have our dissatisfactions. I myself have never experienced a war of countries. What's more, Bahnseim is quite a superpower.』

The Third looked at me and smiled.

『You're entering a field none of us have any experience in. The enemy is our House that's kept growing and growing from our times, on top of the entire kingdom of Bahnseim… now look in the other corner. Lyle, a teen with a little bit of money, and some comrades who don't even make ten. If you want to start here, then your means of success will take decades in the making.』

The Fifth spoke.

『We can't spend that much time. Really… even after death, these large worries just have to keep popping up one after another. But so be it. You're a man of the Walt House after all.』

The Sixth laughed.

『That's right! Lyle, you'll get to experience a sort of battle none of your forefathers have gone through before. It'll be fun! The enemy is formidable, Celes is a monster… just standing up to them will be a living hell!』

The Seventh's eyes were just a little bit teary.

『I'll lend you my power. If there's someone out there capable of stopping Celes, then I'm sure it is you. I won't give that right to anyone else. By the Walt House's… no, your hand, put a stop to Celes.』

While I sat in a daze, the ancestors stood from their seats.

Looking at me, the Third held out his arms wide.

『Now from here on, our… no, Lyle's battle begins. Not of the Walt House, or of us, the time has come to start your own story.』

Chapter 13: Dissolution.

When I woke up, Monica's face was before my eyes

"… Oy?"

No, she's way too close.

"To wake a sleeping chicken the kiss of one as cute as I is necce- … oh, you actually woke up… how unfortunate"

Distancing herself, and straightening her back, Monica seemed delighted.

She'd challenged Celes a number of times, so I assume the loyalty of Automatons must be high.

(But even if I know that, it's still something to be happy about.)

I raised my torso, and tried moving my body. As the ancestors had informed me, my healing was already completed.

My wounds had closed, but I still felt some pain throughout.

A scar remained on my left arm. It was from when she nailed me to the wall, and grated the blade back and forth.

But perhaps it's best that something remained.

(With a reminder like this to look at every day, it looks like I'll be able to live on without forgetting how much a threat Celes is.)

"For now, I'll rest my body some more. This is the Faunbeux's mansion, right? Why did they decide to save us?"

When I said that, Monica looked at me in wonder.

"How were you able to determine our location? When you were

carried here, I was sure you didn't have any consciousness to speak of."

I smiled a little, got off the bed, and tried moving my body a little.

"This and that. This and… ah, and Monica."

"What is it?"

"Thank you. I'll give my gratitude for now."

When I gave her my thanks for saving me, Monica suddenly began making a wriggling movement, her hair style ruffling itself into a mess, as she delightedly…

"Gawd! So you've finally began to dere! Just how long did that take, you damn chicken! We're sleeping in the same bed tonight. Prepare yourself."

(TL: Dere as in the other side of the tsun coin.)

"Yeah, no, we're not doing that. And don't you sleep standing up?"

When I denied her with a smile, she crouched down on the spot, and pretended to cry.

"Even I was worried about you, you know. You didn't show any signs of waking, so I spent most of the time in sleep mode, though."

"So you were asleep!? No, perhaps that was for the best. "

Monica had a line connecting her to me, from which she received Mana.

While that let the automaton even rebuild herself, it also meant my Mana was constantly drained. When recovering my physical state was of the highest priority, having Monica moving around would only slow the process.

"… Where are Novem and the others?"

Monica stood, and spoke expressionlessly.

“Some infighting broke out. The vixen is preparing the bath. Well, with this, there are less nuisances to come in between us. Now, Chicken Dickwad! Take my nursing with everything you’ve got!”

I sat down on the bed, and addressed her.

“Before that, I’ve got a request.”

“How greedy of you. Say anything you want. I’ll carry it out perfectly. Speak!”

To Monica, who awaited her orders, I…

“Can you assemble all our party’s members? I’ve something important to say.”

And finishing those words, I looked up a the ceiling.

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Everyone gathered in my room.

As the heads of history had suspected, the harem goal Novem had spoke of caused their relations to turn dicey.

In the space of the room, everyone stood a considerable distance from Novem.

(It’s to be expected after receiving game-piece treatment.)

It’s not like I intend to chastise Novem for making a harem for me.

I mean, if you think about it, all she did was make sure the ones to gather around me were immune to Celes’ influence.

Whether we're to fight or run, Novem simply determined that such a trait was essential.

They looked at me as I sat on the bed.

Aria looked like she wanted to say something.

Miranda remained wary of Novem.

Shannon nervously assessed her surroundings.

Clara's field of vision was also swimming around the room.

Monica was standing by my side.

And Novem…

"Lyle-sama, what is it you wanted to talk about?"

I stood, and observed the faces of my comrades.

"… I've decided to disband the party. So I'd like for us to decide here whether we'll disband now or in Beim. Perhaps we can make the trip, and look for other parties to join as we work with these members a little longer."

Novem listened to my decision, and silently nodded.

She…

"I will accompany you to the end."

Smiling, I…

"That so? But I'd like it if you made your choice after I told the whole story."

Aria stared at me, and yelled.

“Don’t just proceed talks on your own! And wait, what are you even trying to do? Disbanding and all.”

Miranda was the same, it seems.

“I’m sure a certain someone said he’d make sure I didn’t regret anything, right? That’s a clear-cut abandoning of responsibility right there.”

I gave a bitter smile.

“That’s right. I did say I wouldn’t let you regret. But if we go on as we are, you’ll only regret more. I’ve finally gotten myself a goal. It’s much too big for me, and to be completely honest, I have yet to decide how I’ll even go about carrying it out. But taking you all along will just be going down the road to regrets. Of course, I’m aware it isn’t something I can do alone, and I don’t have such intentions. After this, I’ll reform a party, with the express purpose of working towards that goal.”

I decided to fight.

But in that case, I can no longer walk alongside my comrades without the same resolve.

What I’ve decided is the dis and reassembly of a party.

“That’s just selfish…”

As Shannon looked at me with condemning eyes, I smiled and apologized.

“That’s right. It’s selfish. No matter how far I go, I’ll still be selfish. And the goal I speak of is to defeat Celes.”

On my utterance, Clara corrected the positioning of her glasses, as she spoke.

“Does that imply assassination?”

“I did consider it, but there’s more problems than merits with that one. So when I get to Beim, I’ll reform a party, and start building up power. Do

you want to return to Arumsaas, Clara? Whatever we earn as a party will be evenly divided, so if you have any desires, it may be possible to grant them."

I believe she said she wanted to run a bookstore in the future.

Money-wise, I'm sure we have enough to start up a small store.

Aria commented on my opinion.

"Fight Celes? Are you an idiot? You just crashed and burned on that none too long ago! Challenging that one is… shouldn't you be thinking of running off somewhere and living a quiet life?"

And that does sound quite appealing in itself.

Earn money as adventurers, and eventually use the advice of the ancestors to continue on the Walt House's legacy of reclaiming land. I did consider that path.

I'm sure that would be fine as well.

I'm sure that if I had chosen it, the ancestors would have supported me with their all. But I've already made my choice.

"I can't leave her be. That's why I chose to oppose her. I'm sorry, but this is the end of the party. Don't worry so much over that point. I'll prepare a considerable preparatory period, and if we go all the way to Beim, I'm sure we'll be in great demand. That's just how competent the members of this party are."

Miranda informed me as a representative of the rest.

"Please give me some time to think. And at present, we can't even move from Centralle."

I nodded.

"Yes, I'm sure you'll need time. What about you, Novem?"

Novem's expression looked as if she wasn't expecting that question from me. A little happy, yet discontent at the same time.

A complicated expression.

"I will accompany you to the end."

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Having woken up, I sat across from Lianne.

Resting in a sofa, and sipping tea.

"I give my thanks for saving us. But pardon my rudeness, could I ask your reasons? I can't think there was a single merit in such an act."

With her long and pink hair tied up behind her head, Lianne gave a thin smile.

She looked a bit tired, and her face had more shadows than usual.

"I don't think there any merit to it either. It's just that thing called intuition. Both in meeting you and saving you."

While taking a sip of tea, I wondered if this person had the same sort of sharp feral instincts as the First once had.

"Do you believe such instincts exist?"

"Yes, I do. I mean, I've been saved a number of times by something like that."

With a simple, 'I see,' she returned to her tea.

She must be thinking I'd been through trouble a number of times as an adventurer. She's not wrong with that assumption, and correcting it would

just make matters more complicated.

(Of the First's and Second's wills that were once in the Jewel and so on and so forth… it's no good. It'll just take up time to convince her.)

She did seem much busier than me, anyways.

Along with the preparations to vacate the mansion, she appeared to be probing through some of the deeper internal affairs of Bahnseim.

It was during that act that she went and discovered our party.

"Tomorrow there's going to be an official announcement in Centralle's plaza. Celes will officially be engaged to his royal highness, and become the true queen to be both nominally and virtually."

I already knew, so I wasn't surprised.

"It was going to happen sooner or later, though I do think it a little soon for the announcement."

"They couldn't wait, I hear. See, Celes is quite charming, so the crown prince and the others are working fast to make sure no strange bugs crawl out aiming for her."

Seeing her giggle to herself, I wondered just what was going through Lianne's mind when she saw her former fiancée in such a state…

While she's surely smiling, I doubt she finds it all too interesting inside.

"She's just acting on a whim. Though I do get the feeling she'd calmly prey on any man to catch her fancy."

Lianne agreed.

"I'll bet. Even so, the prince… Rufus will eventually just be pushed to the side, I believe. Worse comes to worst, if a child no one knows the father of is to be born, they'll still sit on the throne all the same."

That's just how twisted it all was.

Ever since Celes set foot in the city, everything rapidly started descending to madness. Thinking of it as the power of a monster made me shiver.

"So by the princess's intuition, how do you think Bahnseim will fare? Do you think it will last?"

On my question, she stared right at me.

"… Isn't that dependent on you? I'm surprised you came out alive after standing before her. It's lucky as all hell that you got away with injuries of that level. You see, I thought you were the key. It was just by lust for revenge, but I wanted you to be the one to bring ruin to this country… I mean, a death match between two carrying the same blood in their veins sounds interesting, doesn't it?"

A voice came from the Jewel.

It was the Fifth's.

『No matter the time, women sure are strong.』

It was an answer as to why she saved me much more satisfying that plain old good will.

Of all else, I was the same.

Even if I sugarcoated it, my petty pride was stirring up a desire for vengeance. I wanted to defeat Celes, and triumph over her.

Those dark emotions included formed the current me.

"Then I have to try hard to answer to your expectations. Will taking on Bahnseim be hard for Faunbeux as a country?"

Lianne stopped her tea-holding hand, and looked at me with a serious expression.

“There isn’t a single country nearby that can put up a decent fight with a nation as large as Bahnseim. And even if they were to win, no small country would be able to govern its mass. Some alliances and unions will need to be made for a chance at victory, but…”

The Seventh let his voice from the Jewel.

『For countries stealing amongst themselves to try uniting, it’s more likely a war will break out amongst themselves before all else. I’m sure it’ll become something plenty muddled up. And I doubt it’s possible in the first place.』

Lianne put to mouth the reason the Seventh was about to say.

“Trying to explain the threat of Celes to one who’s never seen her before won’t breed understanding. Showing her to them will likely get them in her cage. It’s the worst.”

The moment you fully understand the threat, it’s much too late.

“… Princess, what do you plan on doing henceforth?”

On my question, Lianne let a light smile grace her face.

“A princess rejected by their groom doesn’t make for good rumor. Even if I go back, just what treatment awaits… of course…”

I confirmed the sensation that she had used a Skill, and felt the handle of my teacup fracture.

I caught the cup with my left hand, not letting any of its contents spill.

“Oh, how unfortunate.”

It does look like Lianne has a Skill of her own.

When I tried considering what sort of Skill it was, she laughed, and…

“My Skill is 【Trick】. It’s only good for a little mischief, but that’s enough for now. I’ll just use this to bring some misfortune to those that

offer me a cold reception back home."

Seeing her laugh to herself, I left the teacup on the table.

Her eyes had yet to show defeat.

I really wonder what this girl plans to perpetuate.

"… I plan on fighting Celes. But I haven't decided on the means yet."

'I see,' she muttered as she finished her tea.

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-… Aria and Clara dropped by Miranda's room.

While they had their own borrowed rooms, everyone besides Lyle, Novem and Monica had gathered there.

Miranda looked over Aria, Shannon and Clara, and sighed.

"So you said you wanted to discuss the future? Don't you all have your own wills or anything?"

Aria complained.

"But doesn't disbanding after coming all the way here irritate you at all!? The plan went down all too fast, and disbanding after we go all the way to Beim is nothing but trouble, isn't it!?"

Miranda explained.

"That's exactly why Lyle said he'd make some operational time over there, isn't it? How about you use it to look for your next party? For yours and Clara's ability levels, you'll find one in no time."

In truth, everyone's individual abilities were quite high.

While Lyle's party had immature coordination, it was compensated for with personal competence.

Even if they transferred to other parties, the need to polish up coordination remained the same.

Clara posed a question to Miranda.

"Miranda-san, so are you leaning towards disbanding in Beim, then?"

Putting her hand on her hip, Miranda pushed out her chest, and nodded.

"I don't mind either way, really. I mean, I'm following him anyways."

Shannon was surprised.

"Eh!? I mean, Celes-sama is…"

Miranda yelled at Shannon for continuing to add –sama to the accursed name.

"Drop the –sama already! That one's already just an enemy. And you've already bought yourself quite some resentment from her, so trying to curry favor with an honorific is too late."

"That wasn't my intent… but there's still no way we can win."

The girl hanging her head, Shannon, was most likely the one among them who'd confirmed Celes' power to its fullest.

Because her eyes didn't function, her Skill had bestowed demon eyes unto her.

And by their power, she could collect more information than others.

"I'm dragging Shannon along, but Aria, Clara, you both have to decide on your own. Lyle has decided to fight Celes. That's the direction his party will move. You can't be complaining, 'this isn't how it was supposed to be' after that."

Miranda planned on following Lyle. Even if the party disbanded, she just had to be a part of it when it formed again.

She didn't fancy being with Novem, but even so, she chose to go along.

If Novem was to move for Lyle's sake, and she was to as well, then… she knew that as long as she still had some use, Novem wouldn't try to cut her off.

While she saw all of Novem's actions as ominous and uncanny, she could understand that all of them had been for Lyle's sake.

Aria made a bit of a perplexed face.

"Y-you're fine with that? Miranda, you think you can win against that Celes?"

"A frontal attack is impossible. There's the gap in skill… so we'll prepare in a way we can win. Lyle's no fool either. Did he say we'd all be jumping into a pit of flames? He does seem to have the mind to make preparations."

Clara was as collected as usual. It's likely she had already reached her conclusion.

Miranda watched Aria shake.

"So just decide for yourself. If you're aiming to be a first-rate adventurer, then you should take responsibility in your own actions. That self-responsibility thing."

The party had come together for various reasons.

They had come together, attracted by the existence called Lyle, but those without clear goals in mind- Aria and Shannon- couldn't help but sway.

While thinking there was no helping it, Miranda tried directing Aria a

little.

“It’s not like I’ll say you ran away if you decided to join another party. It’s completely natural for a party to break apart if goals differ.”

Clara affirmed her words.

“More so, before you’re gathered up and used by someone like Novem-san, and thrust into a situation you can’t escape from, it’s best you confirmed your own will and intentions. Lyle-san’s way is the kinder by far.”

With a greater understanding of what it meant to be an adventurer than the rest, Clara spoke and nodded to herself.

Aria…

“… But saying something like that after all this time! After just pulling us around however he felt…!”

The fact that Aria liked Lyle was something Miranda understood.

That’s why she spoke.

“Right. Then you’re leaving, are you, Aria? Isn’t that fine? There are plenty of fish in the sea.”

Aria burst out of the room.

Watching her back, Clara addressed Miranda.

“Was that not a little too cold?”

“What of it? I’ve no reason to comfort a love rival. I don’t feel like bullying her with malicious intent, but I’m not going to look after her beyond the scope of a comrade.”

Stroking her light verdure hair, Miranda spoke to Clara.

“If she does something to me, I’ll get back at her. If she saves me, I’ll

repay the favor. But you see, if she doesn't follow along of her own will, then she'll just be a hindrance to the current Lyle. You understand that, right?"

Watching Clara nod, Miranda turned her eyes to the open doorway Aria had left behind…

Chapter 14: The Maddening Metropolis

A large mass of people gathered in Centralle's plaza, overlooked by the imperial palace.

Of the civilians gathered around me, even those that had journeyed far from the furthest reached of Bahnseim had sparkling eyes.

And while I stood with a robe and hood covering my form, no one sent any doubt my way.

Lianne stood beside me, removing her hood, and shaking out her pink hair.

"That just felt stupid. There doesn't seem a point in disguising ourselves."

I also removed my hood, and Novem followed along.

Monica had been wearing her maid uniform the whole time as per usual.

I confirmed the area with Skills, and found there wasn't a soul directing hostility at us. Rather than not directing it, it was as if no one recognized our existence as a whole.

"Even so, is it fine for a royal princess to have come to a place like this?"

On my question, Lianne scoffed.

"You think I don't yearn to witness the making of history? That at that time, at that place, I saw it all… it's good to have such tales to hand down. I mean, the sun starts to set on Bahnseim from here on."

I looked at the balcony of the palace.

We had come quite early in the morning, but even so, there was quite

a number of people lined up in front of us.

Nearby, a troupe of singers and performers showed off their trade to earn money.

Food stalls were also scattered around, and it was as if we were at a festival.

"… Novem, what of Aria and the others?"

When I said that, Novem shook her head.

"As of yet, I am unable to establish communication with them. When you think of what I've done, it's only natural."

"I see."

I didn't look at her face.

The game pieces she assembled for me.

That was the harem.

That they had a resistance against Celes meant they wouldn't be charmed into betraying me.

I do dislike the pawn-treatment of them, but I must admit that seeing the comrades I've shared joy and sorrow with turn to Celes' side wouldn't be a nice scene on the eyes.

"So you thought I would try challenging Celes too?"

Those surrounding us simply waited for Celes to make her grand appearance. They weren't interested in something as lowly as us at all.

Novem spoke to me.

"I wasn't certain what choice you would make. It's just that, considering the future, I thought it best to gather those with natures preventing them from betraying you at your side."

So it didn't matter which way I rolled.

Whether I challenged her or ran, Novem just wanted to have the preparations in place.

Monica informed us of the situation.

"There is some movement within the palace. They're coming."

Just as Monica, who could see further than us, had said, the door to the balcony opened up, and some knights paraded out.

Behind them came the higher official and the king. The queen, and the crown prince 【Rufus Bahnseim】.

His red and curling hair was cut short, and perhaps prepared for this very day, he wore white clothing adorned with ornaments of gold, silver, and other precious stones.

Hand in hand with that prince, wearing a white dress, and an amount of ornaments that clearly seemed like overkill, came Celes.

Cheers of joy came to announce her appearance alone.

(It's really loud.)

Watching the girl wave her hand, a few even swooned.

It looked like she planned to wave that hand until all the cheers died down. Celes was wearing a serene expression, and I did think she was beautiful.

(Her contents are just awful, though.)

She carried along her rapier in a sheath purposely made to make the whole thing look like a ceremonious staff.

Looking at Lianne standing to my side…

“He really does look happy…”

She was watching the crown prince expressionlessly.

And I saw my parents stationed close to Celes.

They looked simply delighted.

I heard a voice from the Jewel.

The Third spoke with great irritation.

『The crown prince looks identical to the bastard… some goddess up there must be trying to piss me off with her blatant revelations.』

Certainly, from afar, he resembled the king I saw within the Third’s memory before.

The Fourth seemed to be focused on his attire.

『That’s way too showy. In bad taste, even… I’m sure it’ll all be nothing but pure gold at the wedding ceremony. What an absolute waste.』

The Fifth listened in to the surrounding cheers.

『Who the hell gets this heated? When it’s highly likely there’ll be war with Faunbeux, and I’m sure an extra tax will soon be collected for that sake. A wedding ceremony, a change of rule, and a war… not a time anyone should be laughing.』

It’s often the case a reason is given, and a tax levied for a temporary period of time.

The imperial capital Centralle wasn’t ignorant to such matters.

The sixth looked at my father by Celes’ side, 【Maizel】.

『So this is what’s become of the fastidious Maizel.』

My father had hated the Sixth’s dark image.

Sending bribes to rise in rank, and making the palace move to his whims. More than anything, the sheer number of wars the Sixth held with the other nobles of Bahnseim was enough reason for him to be hated.

With such hate from his grandson, the Sixth sounded a little sad.

The Seventh was…

『… Stupid son of mine. Letting even Claire fall to Celes' whim.』

Having experienced the power of the Monster Celes first-hand, he couldn't press my mother or father as hard as before.

Even if they weren't beside her all around the clock, the opportunities they had to interact with her were higher than the rest.

Huddling close, happily watching over their beloved daughter. Watching over the scene the Third spoke to me.

『Lyle, you get it, right? Choosing to fight means you'll be…』

Before he could finish his words, I squeezed the Jewel to indicate my affirmation.

A while later, when the surroundings had calmed down, the king's words started coming out.

They were the words to officially denote Celes' engagement.

And the crown prince appeared before the crowd, giving his greetings.

They were normal pleasantries, but the more words from him she heard, the more Lianne's head dropped down.

Her tears had started to flow, so I patted her back, and supported her so she wouldn't collapse.

And it finally came to Celes' turn.

Her voice was clear, and easily audible from afar.

“People of mine. Rejoice.”

That was quite a haughty manner of speech, but those gathered raised their cheers.

“On this splendid day, Bahnseim has become my belonging. Now rejoice, nobles!”

Lined in the castle’s courtyard, the imperial nobles, knights, and feudal lords assembled from across the lands began to applaud.

On Celes’ side, the king and queen, and even the prince and ministers clapped along as well.

“It’s madness.”

Mad as it may be, it was something that everyone present thought of as natural.

Even I was beginning to doubt if I was the strange one here.

“From here on, Bahnseim will expand even further! But…”

Her expression turned a little sorrowful.

And after raising it, she formed another smile…

“There are nobles within this very nation that defy me! There are still those who’ve refused to obey! Wouldn’t you say that’s something unforgivable!?”

Spreading out her arms, Celes received the angry yells of the people…

… Directed at those disobedient nobles, of course.

“Now let us prepare for war. By the time I’ve dyed Bahnsem in one uniform shade… I will let you all have me as your queen.”

Applause. Cheers. And tears of joy…

I clenched the Jewel as I spoke.

“Founder… it really is abnormal.”

The beautiful vixen.

While it was said after the fact that many other factors were involved, 【Agrissa】 was known as the primary factor.

But looking at Celes, I could now understand.

That if such an existence had lived beforehand, then monsters must really exist, and they’ll be coming out one after the other.

I burned the sight of Bahnseim, the country I was to go against, into my eyes.

And noticing me, Celes waved her hand.

Those in my immediate surroundings were almost all moved to tears.

Monica was…

“… I cannot comprehend it.”

I smiled and…

“Well you’re the incomprehensible one to me. It’s just that, with this, I’ve no regrets keeping me here.”

The Fifth spoke to me.

『You can still turn back, you know. Stopping these people as they are now means…』

I tapped the Jewel and let it roll. I denied it.

And to Celes, who directed a smile our way, I smiled as well.

“Just wait up there. I’ll definitely put a stop to you.”

Within the cheers high enough to drive one to madness, I swore it to my heart.

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The announcement in the plaza had only been for the publicization of Celes’ engagement to the prince.

There wasn’t the slightest of apologies sent to Faunbeux, and the knights, soldiers and servants who were on standby in the mansion were laying their anger bare.

Within that mansion.

In the room I had been given, I received a visit from an unexpected guest.

No, rather than unexpected…

“Are you sane? This is no game we’re playing here.”

With a silver plate in hand came Eva the singer.

Stroking her light pink hair, she spoke with confidence.

“Of course! You’re going to be fighting that princess called Celes, right? That will surely be a hero’s tale. And by your side, I’ll see it, hear it, and put it to memory. Someday I’ll make a song of it, and have it heard all throughout the world. With my name tagged onto it, naturally.”

Having gone off to complete her adventurer registration, she presented her guild card to me.

She had likely used her recent savings to accomplish it.

Registering did take a bit of money.

It was normally a loan paid after one started earning as an adventurer.

While reminiscing over the moment of my own registration, I looked up at her face.

And Eva…

"And you told me to anyways… to pass down your tale of heroism."

At this point, perhaps I should have said something like, 'sing of' rather than, 'hand down.'

But that wasn't really important, and remembering that embarrassing moment of mind, I cradled my head in my hands.

Novem sought confirmation with her.

"Are you certain about that? It will be a dangerous journey."

"I'm fine. Even like this, I'm used to travelling, and living on the move. I also know how to fight."

I guess she would be better than an inexperienced adventurer, at least.

And it's important that she approached Celes without being charmed.

"… If you're to join the party, you'll have to go along with our schedules. Perhaps you won't be able to sing whenever you want anymore."

"I can gather more tales and stories as we travel, and witness the main hero story in the flesh! I can put up with that much, at least. I'm also risking my livelihood on this one, so I'm more grateful that you're serious about it."

Novem smiled.

“Lyle-sama, if you look to the Walt Family Precept, she more than passes. I will not offer any opposition.”

(… I don’t really care about those precepts anyways.)

The reason those requirements were formed was because the First Generation’s first love fell through, and he didn’t want to marry anymore.

He didn’t want to marry, but as he was a feudal lord, those around him didn’t accept it.

That’s why they took it as law when he proclaimed the precepts for accepting a wife. This all took place at a party.

It was just an excuse he thought up while drunk, but its regulations were upheld for over two hundred years.

(Why does everything seem heavier when you say it has some history to it…)

From the other heads’ point of view, they were nothing but trouble.

And now the only one to protect them so faithfully was Novem.

“Eh? What? There are precepts? I want to hear them!

To a worked-up Eva, I told her I’d tell her another time, as I took charge of one of the two guild cards she had been issued.”

A knocking sound came from the door, and Monica answered it.

“Oh, if it isn’t Aria-san. Have you come to say your words of parting?”

“Why do you have to stir everyone up, me included? Yo, made your choice yet?”

I asked Aria as such, but she just silently entered, slammed her guild card on the table, and exited the room.

And as the rest of us stood dumbfounded, Novem calmly.

“So Aria-san is confirmed.”

And next it was Clara’s turn to enter the room.

“… What happened with Aria-san?”

I tried giving a simple explanation.

“No, she kinda left in silence. I do think she means to come along, but… what about you, Clara?”

There, Clara handed me her guild card.

“… Are you sure?”

“I’ve thought about it quite a bit, but Arumsaas is a city of Bahnseim. And there are much too many books I’ve yet to read there to lose.”

And you’re really joining in for something like that? I thought as such, but accepted the card anyways.

“Celes might not even do anything to it. Or perhaps we won’t be in time to save it.”

On my words, Clara…

“I just think it’s better than doing nothing at all.”

Saying that, she left the room.

And as if waiting for Clara to leave, Miranda came in, pulling Shannon behind.

She looked at the cards on the table, and at Eva, and sighed.

“Are we the last? And wait, you… I’m sure you were eavesdropping not too long ago, right?”

Hearing that, Eva stuck out her tongue.

“Sorry. But it was just too interesting. And I’ve already received permission. Precepts? It looks like I’ve cleared them without even knowing it!”

As Eva stuck out her chest, Shannon spoke tiredly.

“Those are the precepts for bride-finding, you know. And wait, I don’t think my feelings are being taken into consideration in any of this… hey, isn’t that a little too cruel?”

Shannon pleaded to me for help, but Miranda smile.

“If you think you’ll be able to evade Celes’ grasp alone, then just go and try it. She does seem to hate you, so I’m sure she has only the nicest reception in store.”

Raising a slight scream, Shannon left her own card on the table.

Miranda did the same, without even giving Novem a second glance.

“… If you’re coming along, I don’t think discord within the group will be of any help.”

On my words, she…

“I’ll do my work properly. If it’s orders, I’ll act like we’re getting along.”

I shook my head.

“Just don’t cause any problems.”

“Taken to heart. Now Shannon, let’s go.”

“I get it, so don’t pull me by the hair!”

After the two of them left, Novem smiled.

“So everyone’s going along.”

I sighed a little.

“That’s right. It was a bit unexpected.”

There, Monica muttered a, ‘well, well, well’ under her breath, and spoke.

“Looks like we’ve gained another one, though. Good grief, we’ll have to recalculate our edibles, and go on another shopping voyage out there because of it.”

Sighing some more, I’m not sure if it was just my imagination that she looked quite happy as she said all of that.

Eva was…

“Hey, what’s all this about wife-finding precepts? Um, I don’t have any intentions of marrying him, you know. Hey!”

To a flustered Eva, Novem spoke.

“That’s alright. There’s plenty of time, so just slowly get to know one another before…”

“Oy, quite expanding the harem any further. Can’t we just get normal comrades already!?”

I cautioned Novem on her continued expansion of a growing Harem.

The Fourth evaluated the flow up to now.

『So everyone’s going along. Good for you, Lyle.』

On his words, I hung my head, and gave a bitter smile.

(No, really… I thought there would be no helping us going our separate ways, but… well, I guess it’s something to be happy about.)

It’s just, considering the future, it wasn’t going to be all happy times.

Epilogue

In the back seat of a coupled carriage headed away from Centralle, I looked over the rows of empty seats, before turning my eyes to the shrinking city that had yet to lose its enthusiasm.

Drinks being tossed around left and right, the festival of Centralle wasn't anywhere close to its conclusion.

Of course, this carriage was supposed to be fully booked.

But having been hit with the wave of high spirits washing over the capital, a large majority of them decided to extend their stays.

As a result, it was if our party had booked out the whole place.

Watching the walls surrounding the city, I clenched the Jewel.

He royalty of Faunbeux…

… Lianne had already taken her leave.

(We've been in her care. I hope she stays well.)

We were barely able to converse at the time of parting.

Because she had been much too sorrowful for that.

I heard the Thirds voice.

『Lyle, by the time you return, I'm sure…』

(I know.)

As I continued paying mind to nothing but the scenery behind us, Eva called out.

"Whatcha doing?"

"… Just looking out at the imperial capital. I'm making an oath to myself to return someday."

Saying that, I went and took my seat, and Eva sat beside me.

"Hm~ then I guess that's fine… right! Before I join in on all this, let me hear the story. The tales of the supporting cast are important as well, and learning some more will let me put more emotion into my song!"

To her full-on grin, I directed some cynicism.

"It isn't that interesting a tale."

"Eh? Even when you only experienced your first Growth in Dalien, you kissed an Automaton to life in Arumsaas, and you swindled a noble out of his money in Centralle? Look, I already know that much, so what harm is there in telling me the rest?"

"Who spread all of that!?"

"Everyone did!"

I put Eva and her smile aside, to look at the other members of my party seated around.

Monica waved her hand at me with a grin. Aria's shoulders were shaking ever-so-slightly.

She's laughing. She's desperately trying to hold it in.

Novem looked a little apologetic, and Clara hid her face behind her book.

Miranda blew me a kiss, and Shannon was blatantly chuckling to herself.

"You guys are the worst! Why divulge that of all things!?"

On my words, Aria spoke.

“Don’t make such a fuss. Eva said something about having to know this and that if we were going to be comrades. See, some of your actions were so strong that it just kinda slipped.”

Don’t just play it off as slipping!

Eva was happily taking memos.

“Oy, this isn’t going to show up in the song, is it?”

“Eh? No, I haven’t the slightest. For now I’ll just see it through to the end, and it all depends on how I determine its importance. That being the case… how about you tell me the tale of Lyle known to no other. To me alone!”

With those final words, she grinned at Aria.

(Meaning, she’s pretty much threatening me to include all that in her song if I don’t talk…)

Everyone made irritated expressions all of a sudden, but Novem alone looked a little triumphant.

As my childhood friend of sorts, Novem knew more of my younger days.

“How underhanded.”

“I’ll at least go this far. Now just say it already. Out. With. It!”

On her urging, I thought a little.

And if she was going to sing of it anyways, then…

“I’ll speak, but before that, you have to promise me something.”

“What? If it’s something like, ‘even if I tell you, you can’t sing about it,’ I refuse.”

I shook my head.

“It’s the opposite. There’s a story I’d like you to sing of.”

“A story I don’t know? I do consider myself the knowledgeable type, so if it’s one you know of, I think I might as well. Or could it be you’re requesting a composition?”

I…

“The ancestors of the Walt House. You don’t know them, right?”

Confirming she really didn’t know, Eva nodded. But perhaps her interest wasn’t piqued, as she showed some clear disapproval.

“Those sorts of stories usually have lots of exaggerations tacked on. There are quite a few who ask for the stories of their predecessors turned to song. In order to make their houses look bigger.”

I gave a sincere smile, and spoke.

“Yep, I’ll bet. But it’s not like I’ll only be telling you the good stuff about them.”

Hearing that, Eva nodded.

“That so? Then tell it as it is. What sort of ancestors did you have?”

“There are seven of them, but let’s see… how about I go in order?”

And so I told the tale of our founder.

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… Within the Jewel.

The Third was quite vexed.

『Now about the matter of Lyle turning our lives tales to song.』

The Fourth nonchalantly…

『Does it really matter?』

To a man who didn't seem to understand, the Third yelled.

『Based on how Lyle feels, our stories will be set in history's stone for years to pass! It'll be the worst if something strange is tacked on! As if you can understand the feelings of a man who's supposed to have died a man of valor!』

Holding his head in both hands, the Third flailed about. Those around looked at his with fed-up expressions.

Letting out a sigh, the Fourth spoke.

『Now then, how about we get some other opinions?』

They didn't really mind that Lyle had chosen to fight Celes.

But his method of doing so was- as of yet- unclear.

The Fifth put some sound argumentation to mouth.

『And wait, if we don't know the present situation, then saying we'll make countermeasures is… like how other countries are faring, and their relations to Bahnseim, there's quite a bit.』

The Sixth…

『Well all they can do for now, is collect information, as they increase their capital and train themselves, I guess.』

The Seventh nodded.

『To go up against Celes herself, they'll require an elite female force

of those resistant to her influence.』

Gather soldiers to make an army.

Perhaps create a large mercenary organization, and use that to challenge Bahnseim.

With assassination, even if he won, Lyle would lose his chance to stand on the front stage.

『If there's nothing to do for now but sharpen the few soldiers they have at present, then the problem to consider is just what sort of victory they're aiming for.』

After winning, what did Lyle plan to do?

If played poorly, all that was left would be for him to be offed himself.

Of all else, Lyle was of the same Walt House as Celes.

The one who, of the five ancestors remaining, had come out with the highest standing, the Seventh, gave his forecast.

『First of all, whether Lyle will be standing at the head or not is essential. If he leads the charge and decides to retire afterwards, the country will divide into warring states, I'll bet. If he plans to put someone up on the pedestal, they'll have to be someone with enough charisma and ability to govern a large nation.』

How would Lyle go about it.

It was yet another factor that would affect it all.

The Sixth…

『In the worst case scenario, even after victory, dissatisfaction towards the boy would grow, and that brings us to assassination…』

Displeased, the Fifth looked up at the ceiling, and spoke.

『But Hoisting up someone else is also a pain. There's no guarantee they'll never be charmed by Celes along the way. Even if they be of the same gender as her, do you think Behnseim would accept a queen after being put through hell by Celes?』

The Fourth brought it all together.

『For now, how about we get Lyle and co. enough ability to put up a fight. Well, as they are now, they won't be able to get a stage to fight yet.』

There was a mountain load of problems.

But it was all based on Lyle's decisions.

The Fifth…

『We'll have to train Lyle as well. If we just teach him nothing but our Skills as we've been doing up to now, I can't think he'll ever defeat Celes. Someone here will have to personally train his abilities.』

The Sixth nodded, and…

『Right. Meaning…』

The Third suddenly cut into the conversation.

『The strongest one among us should be the one to do it. So…』

Everyone nodded.

『That would be me.』
『I'll bet it's me.』
『You mean me?』
『Totally my turn.』
『Yep, that's me.』

In an instant, silence engulfed the conference room, and everyone stood from their seats with smiles on their faces.

The Third…

『Oy, oy, just how much do you think I've fought in my life? How many times do you think that incompetent wreck of a king sent me off to fight?』

Correcting the positioning of his glasses with a finger, the Fourth smiled.

『I'll be troubled if you think my Skill is for nothing but movement. My apologies to all of you, but I don't get the feeling I'll lose to the Third or any other.』

The Fifth shook his head, a tired expression across his face.

『How many times do you think my land was attacked? And through it all I endured, and made a stable foundation. Bandits and soldiers, mercenaries… how many do you think I crushed?』

The Sixth laughed at the threats the others tossed out.

『I'm the one who expanded the Walt house, you know. I'm sorry to say it, but I don't feel I'l even lose to my father, the Fifth.』

The Seventh…

『To aid in the recovery of Bahnseim, I crossed countless battlefields. There's no way a man who experienced something like that would ever be weak. Well, I can understand how my predecessors would like to insist that they were strongest, though.』

His parched laughter echoed through the room, and with the opening of the Fifth's mouth…

『Cut the crap! A runaway brat should just shut his mouth! You never won out against me to the end!』
『Because I would never go all out against the elderly! You're still dragging out that runaway stuff… want to go at it, damn old man!?』
『Think you stand a chance? I'd like it you keep the jokes to a limit, you know.』
『My thoughts exactly. Well, the Fourth was more a civil officer, so I

doubt he'd understand the sentiment of us military men.』

『Ha ha ha, so you want to play soldier with those measly medals on your chest? You all seriously think all my fighting was done on a desk? Maybe it's those naïve thoughts of yours that let Celes get her hands on the Yellow Jewel in the first place.』

『Now you've said it, damn glasses!』

『Don't look down on the glasses!』

『『『I'm the strongest here!!』』』

And as all in the Jewel were about to burst into chaos, Lyle manifested.

Perhaps he had nothing to do on the long voyage, as he decided to drop into the Jewel.

"What are you all so worked up about? And wait, you're speaking so loud I can hear it outside, you know."

Before a fed-up Lyle, the Third withheld all he had to say about Eva's case, and explained the current situation.

『No you see, these guys are getting worked up about who's strongest. You can tell right away, can't you, Lyle?』

The Seventh addressed his grandson.

『Now tell them all about my strength, Lyle. In the first place, we only became able to use magic to its fullest from the Fifth. If you think of how much of a definite form it must have taken by my generation, our difference in skill should be more than clear.』

Taking some Glances at Lyle's face, the Seventh tried proving his superiority to the rest.

But Lyle folded his arms…

"And why did things come to this?"

The Fourth cleared his throat, and explained.

『Ah, it's just we thought the one to train you should be the strongest among us. See, there are quite a few here that seem to misguidedly think that must be them.』

Surveying the area with a smile, he turned to Lyle and nodded.

The Sixth as well.

『You can tell, can't you Lyle… now how about you tell them who's the strongest?』

The Fifth too.

『That's right. You know who's the strongest, right Lyle?』

Lyle nodded a few times, and answered with a smile.

"Then I just have to beat all of you guys, right? Now isn't that simple? If all of us fight, the matter should resolve itself."

The air instantly froze, and the ancestors exchanged glances before moving to surround Lyle.

The Third places his hand on Lyle's left shoulder.

The Fourth stood in front of him.

The Fifth, his hand on Lyle's right shoulder.

The Sixth and Seventh circled around behind.

"Eh? Um…"

The Third smiled.

『I see. So you thought of us that lightly… well, I'm sure we're weaker than Celes. But listen here…』

The Fourth.

『You're underestimating us too much, Lyle.』

The Fifth put some power into his grip, making Lyle wince.

『That's right. This is a good chance, so how about we teach you a thing or two.』

The Sixth smiled.

『Then off we go. We'll train you all together.』

"Eh? Um… it's the Seventh!"

Lyle sought aid from his grandfather, but the man himself only smiled.

『Don't worry. If you get injured here, it fixes itself up in a jiffy. Even if your chest is pierced through, you'll be unharmed in reality… Now it's been a while since I last trained you.』

He was smiling, but his eyes alone contained no joy.

"Yes, but that's just the result, right! It doesn't change the fact I'll be pierced, right! Hey, wait!"

Everyone hoisted up a noisy Lyle. The fourth took the lead, and opened up one of the doors.

『You don't have to worry too much. You'll just be fighting a little with everyone. I'm sure it'll be a blast, ahahaha!』

"N-Noooooo!!"

Lyle's scream as he was lifted through the threshold was cut off with the closing of the door…